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P. RYCKMANS  
SU RENSHAN

Translated from the French  
by  
Angharad Pimpaneau

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THE LIFE AND WORK  
OF  
SU RENSHAN



*Pierre Ryckmans*

THE LIFE AND WORK OF  
**SU RENSHAN**

REBEL, PAINTER & MADMAN

1814-1849?

BOOK I

Translated from the French  
by  
Angharad Pimpaneau

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“To steal from one author is plagiarism. To steal from two is research.”

Anonymous Scholar

THE main substance of this work is based on material collected by Mr. Jen You-wen<sup>1</sup> 簡又文. At first, my project was simply to translate Mr. Jen's work (the original Chinese version is about to be published).<sup>2</sup> For various reasons, I found it was necessary to enlarge and modify this first version. To begin with, by discussing certain problems with other specialists on Su Renshan, I saw new perspectives opening up. Also, I found among Mr. Jen's documents information that he himself did not wish to publish but which I feel should be mentioned. Finally, while Mr. Jen quite naturally wanted to concentrate on the Su Renshan paintings contained in his large collection—by far the most important collection of works by Su Renshan—I thought it might be useful to include a study of all of the other Su Renshan paintings we know of today and thus to build up an exhaustive, critical inventory.

So the plan of my work came to differ from Mr. Jen's on various points. As far as information is concerned, several key details have been added. In some places, our interpretations differ and occasionally I offer a critical reevaluation of some of Mr. Jen's conclusions. The greatest differences of opinion arise where qualitative judgements are involved; this is both natural and, I think, desirable. Objective appreciation of Su Renshan's art—of its aesthetic and historical significance set in the context of his provincial environment and the place it occupies in the general history of Chinese painting—can only develop from different interpretations of his work. Finally, the exhaustive catalogue of all the works of Su Renshan which I have been able to trace, the discussion on forgeries and the inventory of the source materials, are additions I have made.

These developments of the initial—and fundamental—nucleus provided by Mr. Jen, adopting interpretations sometimes quite foreign to his way of thinking, ended up giving my work a character and structure of its own. If I persisted in calling my work simply a “translation” or “adaptation”, I would risk abusing Mr. Jen's loan, crediting him with views and opinions for which I alone am responsible. However I want to stress the enormous debt I owe his research. Without it, I could never have attempted the present work. Further, without Mr. Jen's efforts, both as historian and collector over several decades, our knowledge of Su Renshan's personality and art would have been forever incomplete.

The survival of an “*artiste maudit*” depends entirely on the devotion of a small number of collectors. In the case of Su Renshan, apart from Mr. Jen's activity, we must also acknowledge Mr. Lee Kwok-wing 李國榮 and his eminent

<sup>1</sup> Chinese proper names are transcribed according to the so-called “pinyin” system of romanisation, officially adopted in China in 1958. The only exceptions are transcriptions of the names of certain people, who have themselves chosen another version and currently use it to sign their own publications.

<sup>2</sup> 簡又文: [畫壇怪傑蘇仁山]. At the time of writing, this work is in press in Hong Kong.

contribution. Mr. Lee has not only collected a large number of Su Renshan's works but also took on the task of collecting as much biographical information about him as possible. This double endeavour culminated in 1966 in an exhibition (City Hall Museum, Hong Kong) and the publishing of a monograph.<sup>3</sup> This monograph—the first biographical and critical study on Su Renshan to be published—is a pioneer work to which all future research is bound to refer. Mr. Lee, whom I have consulted frequently in preparing the present work, has been the most valuable of guides. He is very familiar with Su Renshan's work and in addition he has a deep understanding of Cantonese painting in general, so poorly appreciated outside its home province. He has shown an active interest in my work, displaying the utmost generosity in giving me access to all the unedited material from his personal archives and in helping me to track down paintings by Su Renshan in various private collections.

Essentially I have merely exploited the fruit of the labours of these experts. If this book makes a new contribution to the study of Chinese painting, all the merit is theirs. I only hope they will forgive me the candid opinions I have taken the liberty of expressing, conflicting though they may sometimes seem.

The various collectors whose names are mentioned in the Catalogue were generous with their time and permitted me to consult their paintings and to photograph them. I thank them here collectively. The photographic archives, including all the Su Renshan paintings I have managed to locate, were built up thanks to financial help from the Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong and l'Institut Belge des Hautes Etudes Chinoises. Both these institutions now have a complete set of photographs which research students can easily consult.

Professor Li Chu-ting first inspired me with the idea of working on this book. It was he who introduced me to Mr. Jen You-wen. Without his inspiration I would never have undertaken this work. I am grateful to him not only for this early encouragement, which was followed by a fruitful exchange of opinions, but also for part of the photographic documentation; all photographs of paintings from the Suma collection (Tokyo) were made by him.

I have been helped throughout by the direct, personal interest of Professor F. King, director of the Centre of Asian Studies of the University of Hong Kong, to whom I would like to address my sincere gratitude.

Both the publishing and the outlay of this book are the work of M. R. Vienet, who unstintingly offered his competence and energy to the completion of this project. It is thanks to him that this work has appeared.

Mme. Pimpaneau has kindly undertaken the translation into English. She has performed the task with understanding and devotion and I am deeply grateful to her.

Hong Kong, February 1970

<sup>3</sup> Lee Kwok-wing: "Su Jen-shan" 李國榮, 蘇仁山; Chinese text and English translation; 18 illustrations; City Hall Museum, Hong Kong 1966.

## INTRODUCTION

"This conception of works of the past is completely illusory; what has been preserved is only a small, specious collection chosen according to the dictates of the mentality of clerks. . . ."

J. Dubuffet: *Asphyxiante culture*, Paris, 1968, p. 11.

"Scholars may well feel shocked when we recall the massacres of artistic masterpiece but they forget that, thanks to them, the very survival of works of art is the result of a far more cruel massacre. Ninety-nine per cent of what thousands of artists and writers, with great,

middling or little talent, have lovingly painted or written through the ages, what ordinary people, our forefathers, have seen or admired, what gave them joy, made them sad or enthusiastic, the hope and despair of whole generations, is thrown into the dungeons of history, there to perish in a huge charnel-house. Of the cultural reality of the century preceding ours, we know nothing except what chance reveals to us of our ancient heritage through archeology: a miserly one per cent."

R. Escarpit: *Honorius, Pape*, Paris 1967, Foreword, p. 8.

WHO is Su Renshan?

The western specialist in Chinese art need feel no shame because he never even heard his name. Most Chinese connoisseurs, unless they come from Guangdong province, share this ignorance. Not only has Su Renshan never been mentioned in a western work on Chinese painting but the most basic Chinese reference books are silent about him, with the exception of the monumental index by Shang Chengzuo 商承祚, "Zhongguo lidai Shu Hua Zhuanke Jia Zi Hao Suoyin" 中國歷代書畫篆刻家字號索引 (Peking 1960) and again, the author is Cantonese.

Su Renshan is largely unknown in the rest of China and even in his own province he has suffered from a relative lack of recognition. Wang Zhaoyang 汪兆鏞, in the original version of his panorama of Cantonese painters (*Lingnan Hua Zheng Lue* 嶺南畫徵略) deliberately ignored Su Renshan. It is only in the later edition of this work that a note on him was appended and this was a very rudimentary reference containing a gross factual error.<sup>1</sup>

When our knowledge of the great masters of Chinese painting is still handicapped by so many inexactitudes, by confusion and errors,<sup>2</sup> the reader might well question the usefulness and importance of taking the trouble to exhume and analyse the personality and work of such an obscure provincial painter as Su Renshan. But Su's significance is easily justified. It is merely necessary for the reader to glance at the illustrations accompanying this text. At first sight they reveal an art striking in its originality and whose aesthetic quality merits an audience much larger than a restricted circle of local admirers. His work enriches the universal heritage of painting. Other more objective reasons may be added: first, in the history of Chinese painting, examining the "case" of Su Renshan can help us place certain traditional values in perspective—values which, up to the present, have cramped and limited the approach of Chinese and even western historians and critics. Furthermore, study of the socio-political history of South China at the beginning of the 19th century is assisted by the story of Su Renshan. It is one more revealing insight into this period of turmoil, which led up to the creation of modern China.

In the history of Chinese painting, the paradox of Su Renshan's exceptional accomplishment in his art and the almost total oblivion into which he later sank,

throws a new light on the process of artistic creation in China. At the same time it warns us to be more cautious and conscious of defects in the methods used by traditional historiographers. As we will see when studying the development of Su Renshan's style, his originality and audacious creativeness are a direct result of his provincial isolation and his relative ignorance of the classical works of art. This reduced the pressure exerted on him by Tradition. His "provincialism" (especially salutary at a time when tradition was becoming more and more restrictive and had reduced scholars in the cultural and artistic centres to bloodless academics) had specific features—a crude, unpolished style, spontaneity, inventiveness, also found in other schools of painting far from Guangdong, at this period. The Nanga school 南畫 in Japan is a perfect example. A large number of its productions bear striking similarities to Cantonese painting. The reason for this similarity is partly that Japanese artists found themselves in the same position with respect to the great Chinese pictorial tradition, as Chinese painters in distant provinces; both were deprived of direct contact with old masterpieces and furthermore, their artistic education was the same, based on the same illustrated manuals.

Much though we may admire Su Renshan, we should not forget it is thanks to a happy coincidence—and the fervent zeal of two or three enlightened collectors—that today we know a few of his paintings (those which still exist, hardly a century after his death, are no more than 10% of the total) and have some fragmentary and confused information about his life and character. Had he been born a little earlier, his entire work and even the memory of his name, after a brief spell of local notoriety based purely on oral tradition, would almost certainly have perished. Many factors condemned him to oblivion, an oblivion in which innumerable other geniuses who sprang from similar origins were buried. The survival of a Chinese painter has always depended on his being recognised by the Court or by the small scholarly elite, the arbiters of taste. These, from the time of the Southern Song, were concentrated mainly in the metropolitan cultural centres of the Jiangnan region. This scholarly coterie was more influential than the Imperial Academy but no less parochial in its ideas on aesthetics. In these sophisticated, intellectual circles, very enlightened canons of taste had been elaborated. It is unnecessary here to describe the merits of the actual artistic work which corresponded to their theories. Their only defect was a ferocious exclusiveness. Anything which did not satisfy their criteria—even their ideological conventions or social prejudices<sup>3</sup>—was considered beneath contempt. They monopolised historiography and criticism. The works they chose to ignore or which, by force of circumstances, were unknown to them because they were by artists without influential connections or isolated in the provinces, had little chance of surviving for posterity. Su Renshan, whose wanderings never took him further afield than Guangdong-Guangxi, who held no social position among the local gentry and whose behaviour and ideas were an insult to all traditional values of the Confucian elite, was the victim of a conspiracy of silence even more deliberate and severe.

If we persist in judging Chinese painting (on a larger scale, the same is true of Chinese civilisation as a whole) according to the written standards prevalent in the official world and among the gentry, we obtain an artificial and incomplete picture of the living, moving realities of the uninterrupted creativeness of this art

(or of this civilisation). At times, the official mirror is misleading because there were periods, such as the 19th century, to which Su Renshan belonged, when this narrow-minded upper class, ever more divorced from reality, only reflected its own sterility. In fact, a strong current of life and creativeness still existed, pursuing an independent course and unrecorded. Of what was the value, the vitality and meaning of these currents, which were denied all official recognition? We have a glimpse of them through an accidental interpreter like Su Renshan. What his work reveals most dramatically is this other world of artistic life, largely unfettered by tradition and the bonds of "good taste". Through it we discover the relativity of the judgements and values we previously held (the sterility accredited to 19th century Chinese painting, for example). These criteria only apply to the work of a non-representative minority.

Finally, as pointed out above, the case of Su Renshan is of interest to the historian of socio-political phenomena. In China's history, each time the gap between the static conservatism of the official elite and the obscure dynamism which was continually undermining the base became too wide, the living forces of evolution gained impetus and drove their way into History. An explosion of revolutionary violence would occur, rocking the very foundations of the existing social, political, and cultural structure. Su Renshan lived on the eve of one of these uprisings, the Taiping rebellion, in the very district which saw its first stirrings. He was born in the same year and province as Hong Xiuquan and belonged to the same social class; they underwent a similar intellectual education and had much the same early experiences. The frustrations, failures and parallel destinies of these two men can not be explained solely by chance. Both were possessed by the same revolutionary zeal, which we find developing throughout South China in the first half of the 19th century. Each expressed this according to the dictates of his genius, Su through his art and Hong through political action. The path chosen by Su, his isolation and premature death prevented him from exerting any lasting influence on those around him. In this respect, there is no comparison between his secluded life and the brilliant career of Hong. But Su is no less bound up in the dynamism of this period and region where the first phase of China's awakening to the modern world was played out. Limited though it may be, his testimony opens for us a vivid perspective of this decisive period of Chinese history that should not be neglected.



## CHAPTER I

# THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

**A**LTHOUGH the region comprising the modern province of Guangdong is mentioned far back in history, it is only in the Ming dynasty that we see it really beginning to play a part in the great symphony of Chinese culture.

Before the Ming, Guangdong had only contributed isolated figures, like the statesman and poet Zhang Jiuling 張九齡 and Huineng, the famous sixth Patriarch of the Chan Buddhist sect, both in the Tang period. In a sense, Huineng is symbolic of the spirit of his province, a country man whose blunt, direct and intuitive mind contrasted strongly with the erudite sophistication of the scholars.<sup>1</sup>

Until the beginning of the Ming period, Guangdong still contained great stretches of virgin land and was largely pioneering country. It was peopled with immigrants who had been ousted from the provinces of central China by successive waves of political upheaval. Remote and protected by natural barriers, it remained relatively isolated until the end of the 19th century. Needless to say, the immigrants arrived unencumbered by the baggage of a literate culture and although the harsh life of the marches stimulated daring and initiative, it left little time for aestheticism.

Remoteness and geographical isolation profoundly influenced Guangdong's culture; it became hyper-conservative and yet strived to be independent. Extreme conservatism is characteristic of the bordering cultures of any civilisation: while in the centre things evolve and are transformed, the periphery with no cultural motor of its own, stays staunchly faithful to the point of anachronism, to the customs, language, beliefs and rites bequeathed by ancestors.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore because of poor communications and the huge distances separating it from the capital, Guangdong was relatively unfettered by central power and control. A famous saying describing Sichuan, "first province in the Empire to rebel and last to be quelled" 先天下之亂而亂, 後天下之治而治, applies equally well to Guangdong. A heterodox belief or a subversive movement could easily take root in these far corners of the Empire and was firmly embedded there long before it was even heard of by the Court or steps could be taken to suppress it. Guangdong was affected later by the wars and uprisings that periodically shook China. After the Manchu invasion, Guangdong continued to put up an obstinate resistance, long after the rest of the country had capitulated. This stubbornness was finally drowned in blood; the terrible massacres in which the Manchus indulged in reprisal were never forgotten by the people. Later, during the reign of Kangxi, a particularly brutal and unpopular imperial decree revived the hostility of the masses to this dynasty: this was the famous order whereby all the coastal population of the southern provinces was forced to go and live in the interior. This aberrant measure, whose aim was to sever all connections with the irredentist Mings in Taiwan, also affected Zhejiang and Fujian but it was applied with particular rigour in Guangdong, tearing tens of thousands of peasants and fishermen from their land, villages, houses, temples and ancestral tombs and depriving them in a day of all means of subsistence. Resentment of

the Manchus was therefore kept very much alive in South China. It first found expression in a massive and organised form in the Taiping rebellion and we will see how important a part this played in the destiny of Su Renshan in particular.

Guangdong was under less strict surveillance from the capital and at the same time more exposed to influences from the outer world. Canton, an outpost of the Empire and the main port for maritime commerce with South East Asia and the West, was a cosmopolitan port of call for merchant ships and also, from the early 16th century, the first foothold of western missionaries in China. When the Portuguese settled in Macao in the mid-16th century (this disturbing threat of a world entirely foreign to China and of which the rest of the country was still unaware), they really established themselves as a permanent influence. Even after a series of steps had been taken in the interior of the Empire to curb the activities of the missionaries, their presence was still felt in Canton. At the beginning of the 19th century the first protestant missionaries also arrived. We know that one of their tracts acted as a catalyst on the revolutionary ideas of Hong Xiuquan. However superficial and distorted his concept of Christian doctrine (later one of his most gifted followers, Hong Rengan, showed for this a deeper understanding) it nonetheless provided a ferment with which he could brew up the traditional concept of the Chinese universe until its very foundations shook. We have proof that Su Renshan also heard foreign missionaries preaching in Canton. There is nothing to suggest that these teachings, listened to idly and probably out of simple curiosity, influenced his thought. There is however no doubt that his general artistic and intellectual development were affected by a certain atmosphere peculiar to Guangdong and due both to its less rigid subservience to the cultural and political orthodoxy that gripped the interior of the country and to its exposure to new stimuli. Such a situation was eminently suitable to the questioning of traditional values—as is eloquently confirmed in the revolutionary annals of modern China.<sup>3</sup>

As far as the formal expression of culture was concerned, Guangdong suffered from provincialism and from poor contact with the active centres of art and literature. Only in the Ming period did it begin to produce a few writers, thinkers and artists. This first flourishing was stunted by the Manchus during brutal repressions to quell opposing Ming loyalists and only regained impetus two centuries later, in the reign of Qianlong. Throughout, in comparison with developments in other provinces of China, Cantonese culture<sup>4</sup> was psychologically handicapped by the backwardness, imposed by historical circumstances.

For a long time, Guangdong was looked upon as a barbaric region (we saw in Note 1 the gracious manner in which Huineng, in the Tang dynasty, was received when he went to visit the monk Hongren and asked to become his disciple: “You come from Guangdong and you are a barbarian, how do you expect to become a Buddha?”). It was traditionally a place of exile for political offenders and disgraced civil servants. Coming from Central China, these exiles felt they were banished to the end of the earth, far from the amenities of civilisation, lost amidst the alarming miasmas of a tropical world.

Thanks to its fertile land and busy commerce, under the Ming and Qing Guangdong became very prosperous. Consequently, its name came to evoke not a backward, primitive region but a fascinating, *exotic* country. “Guangdong lies on

the edge of the ocean, in the confines of the south; here you find mountain birds, aquatic plants and creatures, strange flowers, exotic fruits—lychees, coral, mother-of-pearl; they have the brilliance of sunshine and are resplendent with marvelous colours” wrote an 18th century Cantonese scholar who, to introduce his book on the literary accomplishments of his native province to the educated Chinese public, adopted the language and imagery which would appeal to them most.<sup>5</sup> The sensuous charm of this distant part became proverbial: “Young people should not set foot in Guangdong” 少不入粵—a gibe directed particularly at the sumptuous delights offered by Canton, whose pleasure district, made up of floating establishments anchored on the river, was renowned throughout China.<sup>6</sup>

Until very recent times, travelers from other provinces felt bewildered when they arrived in Guangdong. Everything contributed to this feeling: distance, slow communications, the climate, the semi-tropical flora, certain anachronisms in customs, the food and cooking and above all the speech barrier, because Cantonese, at first hearing, is unintelligible to the rest of the Chinese.<sup>7</sup>

The amused curiosity, the condescending superiority or open contempt, often unintentional but always offensive, shown by “Northerners” (for a Cantonese, the north begins very low down on the map of China), provided the best nourishment for Cantonese particularism. In a country so keenly aware of history, belonging to a region bereft of historical associations is felt to be a cruel inferiority. This feeling of inferiority has led the Cantonese to cherish their regional peculiarities more dearly, to entrench themselves more firmly, to resent all outside interference,<sup>8</sup> trying to create an artificial, autonomous cultural identity, exaggerating the historical contribution of their province to Chinese culture generally. Far from exploiting what they really have to offer—folk art, indigenous customs, oral literature in colloquial language, theatre, handicrafts etc., they stress what is least significant: academic works of the local elite, usually indifferent and insipid copies of what was fashionable in the sophisticated cities.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, in the field of painting, the official panorama is disappointing. Lin Liang 林良, active at the end of the 15th and the beginning of the 16th century and the only Cantonese painter to win national renown, is proudly claimed by his home province. His ties with it are in fact tenuous as he made his career in the Capital, as a painter attached to the Court. Gao Yan 高儼 is a vigorous and attractive landscape painter who lived in the late Ming and early Qing periods. He retired from public life when the Manchus usurped the throne. The 18th century was a livelier period; its most famous artist was Li Chien 黎簡 (1747–1799). It would be pointless to review here all the local celebrities. On the whole, their work is dull and it has been discussed elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> In the 19th century, there was a very unusual painter who is worth singling out—Li Kui 李魁. Significantly, he was not a scholar but a craftsman who specialised in making frescoes, which in South China are very popular and often used to ornament doorways and the outer walls of houses and temples. Using ink and bold colours, he translated his experience as a frescoist on to paper and his work is forceful, direct and original.<sup>11</sup> A contemporary of Su Renshan, who incidentally also came from the same district, Su Liupeng 蘇六朋, deserves to be better known. He was very fashionable in his own province and practically all Cantonese private collections include some of his

paintings.<sup>12</sup> He was extraordinarily prolific and his innumerable works were shamelessly flattering to his clientele; they are slightly vulgar, often laxly executed but always buoyed up by a jovial vitality. Besides the series of vast works he mechanically churned out for the drawing rooms of the rich merchants of Canton, there are also smaller paintings (fans, album leaves) that are surprisingly vivacious. Being extremely versatile, he experimented with all types and styles of painting. The most interesting results are figure paintings, particularly small, humble anecdotal scenes from daily life, where he shows himself to be an astute and funny observer. His greatest merit is that he explored a world usually despised by Chinese painters: the social realities of his period, the existence of the common man.

The later development of Cantonese painting is beyond the scope of the present work, which only aims to give some idea of the environment into which Su Renshan was born. It is sufficient to say that this development showed both appalling taste and an amazing spirit of adventure and innovation.<sup>13</sup> The two brothers Ju Chao 居巢 (active in the second half of the 19th century) and Ju Lian 居廉 (1828–1904) applied western methods of life drawing and the use of colour, to the traditional formula of album leaf (flowers, birds, insects); the result, as monotonous as mass production, is nearly always feeble and often hideous but it was certainly novel and had considerable influence. The brothers Gao Jianfu 高劍父 (1879–1951) and Gao Qifeng 高奇峯 (1889–1933), the leaders of the “School of Lingnan” 嶺南 were real pioneers. They went to study in Japan and brought back some ideas on technique and aesthetics, characteristic of the hybrid and syrupy art of the Meiji period. They applied themselves to the problem of modernising traditional Chinese painting with fine courage, endeavouring to incorporate western plastic language into it. This produced absurd results, like adjusting the spatial composition of a Chinese painting to Renaissance, geometrical perspective, or painting an aeroplane in the sky of a traditional landscape. Today, their enterprise may seem naïve, as well as bewildering but it was nevertheless a praiseworthy effort. In a way, their failure was fruitful, because it has helped to show up the problems with which modern Chinese painting is confronted. Their work provides a milestone of a sort in the historical perspective.

## CHAPTER II

# LIFE OF SU RENSHAN

“Once we have become acquainted with erudite men, we realise that there are few people in the world who are less reliable or who have greater affinities with lunatics and maniacs. Science, constantly tempting us to draw vast conclusions from small, feeble facts, is an irritant, a dangerous stimulant of the imagination.”

P. Claudel, *Journal* (I, p. 34)

Su Renshan's biography should really be written as a novel. The little we know of his life is as strange and dramatic as could be wished and enveloped in mystery. There is tempting scope for imagination but unfortunately we must harness ourselves to a much more arid work. Because of the wall of silence built up around Su Renshan, the few facts we can glean about him were recorded at a later date and are often contradictory. Some come from very dubious sources. Some are based on anonymous rumours transmitted orally. Our task is to reassemble, compare and critically examine all this information. This leads us into long and often inconclusive discussions over trifles. While advancing myopically along this path, we are in danger of finally losing sight of the only important fact: the lonely passion of the man, a painter consumed by his genius as by a fever, the graphic enigmatic quality of which has been preserved in a few hundred works. Even if the essence escapes us, faced with the confusion and obscurity which surrounds Su Renshan's life, we can only begin to understand him when the thankless task of compilation has been carried out.

There is hardly a single fact in his biography of which we can be certain, even the most elementary and fundamental. For example, such a rudimentary problem as determining his exact personal name, will show the type of difficulty which we will constantly encounter.

According to most of the records,<sup>1</sup> his personal name was Changchun 長春 and his courtesy name Renshan 仁山 (either a courtesy name 字 or a literary name 號). At first sight, there is no reason why this should raise problems, moreover, he signs himself “Renshan Su Changchun” 仁山蘇長春 on many of his early paintings.<sup>2</sup> This sequence, courtesy name / surname / personal name is the common one. The sequence, personal name / surname / courtesy name is barely conceivable. Moreover, a painting made when he was fifteen and dedicated to his father,<sup>3</sup> is signed “Su Changchun”. According to the rules of traditional etiquette, it is barely credible that an adolescent would have addressed his father other than by referring to himself by his personal name 名; use of a courtesy name or a literary name—字 or 號—would be very unbecoming. Finally, there is the evidence of the connotations of these two names: “Changchun” carries with it a slightly vulgar superfluity of auspiciousness and contentment, common in the personal names of lower and middle class people (furthermore, Su Renshan's younger brother was called Jixiang 吉祥, which is a suitable match), while “Renshan” is more literary and refined—more what one would expect in a scholar's courtesy name.

Now we come to the evidence of the *Su Clan Register* 蘇家族譜 where it is emphatically stated that Renshan was his personal name and Changchun (this time, the orthography is 長椿) his literary name.<sup>4</sup> The former is confirmed by one of the artist's personal seals, which unequivocally places Renshan as the courtesy name.<sup>5</sup> Is not the double testimony of a clan register and a personal seal sufficient to settle the argument? Not necessarily. As we will see further on, the register does not seem to be an entirely reliable source and it is possible that the note on Su Renshan was added later and based on second-hand information. As for the seal, the rest of the wording has fancy elements, displaying Su Renshan's characteristic liking for puns and esoteric allusions (as surname, he does not use "Su" but, inexplicably, "Zhurong" 祝融) and should not necessarily be taken literally either.

To conclude, it seems impossible to give a safe and certain answer to this question. Probably, his personal name was originally Changchun and his courtesy name Renshan; at a certain time, he must have substituted his personal name for Renshan, his courtesy name. This practice had precedent e.g. Wen Zhengming 文徵明 used Zhengming as his personal name, although it was originally his courtesy name; his real personal name was Bi 璧.

Su Renshan, like many other individualistic painters, used a large number of literary names. Some were formed by homophony, thus Jingfu 靜甫 gave Jingfu 靖甫 and Jinghu 靜虎 (in Cantonese "hu" 虎 is pronounced "fu"). Some are humorous and reflect the orientation of his thinking, e.g. "the Seventh Patriarch Renshan" 七祖仁山, whereby, in a burlesque way, he proclaims his desire to be enrolled in the spiritual line of Huineng; "the-seventy-third-saint-who-looks-over-the-Palace-wall-towards-the-outer-world" 宮牆外望七十三聖—an allusion to Confucius' seventy-two disciples—reveals his ambiguous attitude, that of an irreverent disciple, towards Confucianism; "Changchun the Taoist" 長春道人 and "the Taoist of Ling-nan" 嶺南道人 suggest leanings towards Taoism. We might also mention the courtesy names Shouzhuang 壽莊, Daiyue 戴月, Qixia 棲霞, Liuhuo 流火, Aging 阿青; Zhurong Renshan 祝融仁山 (often met) remains unintelligible: the seal cited in Note 5 clearly indicates that "Zhurong" is used as the "surname" but it is difficult to see in what connection. Besides these numerous courtesy names, Su Renshan also loved playing with graphic fantasies or homophonies of his surname. He sometimes uses the archaic variant 𩚑 (equivalent to 鮓, here a borrowed character for 蘇); he replaces Renshan 仁山 by the homophonous 人山 or by others more obscure: 𩚑𩚑, 𩚑𩚑 or 𩚑𩚑 (the homophony only works in Cantonese). Instead of Changchun 長春, he indifferently writes 長椿 or 蓑蓑. He further amused himself by baptising his successive studios with fancy names (清夢山房, 石鼓堂, 壽石軒, 莊嚴堅紉堂) and some of these also present insoluble riddles (e.g. 鯨鯢鮓鮓齋).

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Su Renshan was born in Xingtang 杏壇鄉,<sup>6</sup> a small market town in the prefecture of Shunde 順德縣 in Guangdong province.

Shunde occupies the fertile delta of the Pearl River, south-south-east of Canton and is one of the richest prefectures of the province. It derives its wealth

mainly from sericulture, developed under the Ming: Shunde silk is famous for its quality throughout China.

Watered by a vast network of canals, it is truly a land of abundance.<sup>7</sup> Apart from agriculture, the peasants add to their income by breeding fish and a village surrounded by a fish-pond is a characteristic feature of the landscape of Shunde. The countryside has hardly changed since Su Renshan's time and is radiantly beautiful—intensely green fields of sugar cane, laced with canals, stretch out luxuriantly between chains of dun and violet hills.

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Su Renshan's father was Su Yinshou 引壽<sup>8</sup> and his courtesy name 字 was Yuanru 願如.<sup>9</sup> He was employed as a tax-collector by the Nanhai prefecture, neighbouring Shunde. He was himself an amateur painter of some competence.<sup>10</sup>

Su Yinshou therefore belonged to that class of parasites who grovelled in the shadow of the yamen—the factotums of the mandarin. Because they had not passed the civil service examinations, these employees were condemned to humble positions. At the side of the mandarins, who were too few, constantly transferred from one place to another and always, on principle, strangers to the regions they administered, these native handymen managed to make themselves indispensable. It was they who really dealt with current concerns and sorted out the problems that they alone knew all about. Their privileged position as intermediaries between the mandarin and the administered, often gave them considerable prestige and power.

Su Yinshou, like all men in his situation, cultivated a wide connection in many different spheres so as to extend and consolidate his personal influence. Certain anecdotes which will be related further on suggest that he was an opportunist and an intriguer. This aspect of Su Yinshou's character seems to have been largely responsible for the more and more violent clashes which occurred in later years, between him and Su Renshan. Su Renshan, with his eccentric temperament, not only caused scandal in this entourage, he also thwarted his father's plans and jeopardised his position. Su Yinshou finally decided to sacrifice his son and save his career. In this conflict, which ended so tragically for Su Renshan, other more intimate factors may also have prevailed. Later in the text, we will examine these other motives of the father, which suggest an even more unpleasant side to his character.

Su Yinshou had at least three sons.<sup>11</sup> Renshan was the eldest; the youngest, called Jixiang 吉祥 (courtesy name Bihuo 必獲, literary name Ruyi 如意) was also a painter.<sup>12</sup> In the *Su Clan Register*, his talent is said to have been equal to his brother's but this is an unmerited compliment: his work did not attract the attention of connoisseurs and the only known surviving painting by him is very insipid.<sup>13</sup>

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Su Renshan was born in 1814. This date may be deduced from a long inscription, dated 1841, where he says he is twenty-eight (twenty-seven according to the western way of counting age\*).

\* Unless the contrary is indicated, ages referred to in the following text are the Chinese ages, i.e. there is an extra year added on.

This colophon, inscribed on *A landscape in the style of Wen Zhengming* is a schematic autobiography and is an essential item of information in our research. Here is a complete translation of the text<sup>14</sup>:

"I have here imitated a theme of Wen Hengshan. Bi was the personal name of this master; his courtesy name was Zhengming and his literary name Hengshan. His biography is recorded in detail in the section on literature in the *History of the Mings*. From my very earliest years, I have had a passion for art. As I grew up, I learnt to admire the elegant style of this master and for many years I too lived by my brush.<sup>15</sup>

When I was a year old, I was afraid of cats and dogs and often had convulsions.

When I was two years old, I rocked myself on my mother's lap; my father cut my hair. This is when I learnt what shame and honour were.<sup>16</sup> As I couldn't yet talk, I obviously knew nothing about painting.

When I was three years old, I ate if my mother asked me to but, unless she tempted me, I refused food offered by others.

When I was four years old, my father taught me the *Three Words Classic*<sup>17</sup> and from this time, I took an interest in calligraphy but didn't yet know about painting.

When I was five or six years old, I developed a passion for calligraphy and I covered all the doors and walls with my inscriptions.

When I was seven or eight years old, I could already paint landscapes and write inscriptions that well conveyed the content of my pictures.

When I was nine years old, I went to school and a master taught me the Classics. These lessons left me with no time to paint.

When I was ten or eleven I again started to paint, in the spare time between lessons.

By the time I was twelve, I had already made my name as a painter in my home town.

When I was thirteen, my renown spread to all the scholars of the region.

When I was fourteen, I visited Canton.

When I was fifteen, I liked to copy paintings and practise calligraphy in the chancellery style of the Han.

When I was sixteen, I began to prepare for the Civil Service examinations.

When I was seventeen, I loved poetry.

When I was eighteen, I became obsessed with neo-Confucian philosophy.

When I was nineteen, I failed the provincial Civil Service examinations.

When I was twenty, I immersed myself in a study of political discourses.<sup>18</sup>

When I was twenty-one, I chose a master and started to learn the modern ritual.

When I was twenty-two, I again failed the Civil Service examinations.

When I was twenty-three, I gave up examinations once and for all and my passion for painting returned.

When I was twenty-four, I went to Cangwu.<sup>19</sup>

When I was twenty-five, I visited the caves of Guilin.

When I was twenty-seven, I began to prepare for marriage.



I am now twenty-eight and beginning to regret many errors I have made in word and deed.

The 12th day of the 10th month, in the winter of the year Xinchou, 21st in the reign of Daoguang (1841). Painted in Canton by Su Renshan of Shunde."

On another painting, dated the following year, Su Renshan repeated these autobiographical details but much more succinctly and with less chronological exactitude:<sup>20</sup>

"When I was four years old, I began to learn the Classics at home. When I was sixteen, I started to study under the guidance of a master. My literary education ended when I was twenty-one and I returned home. In the solitude of the country, I absorbed myself for two or three years in studying examination essays. I tried the Civil Service examinations twice but failed both times. On impulse, I left for Guilin and visited the caves there. . . ." (A description of the Guilin caves follows.)

These facts call for some comment and enlargement.

First, the convulsions he says he suffered from in infancy: the term used (癇疾) can be interpreted in different ways. One meaning is epilepsy. In later life, Su Renshan seems to have suffered from nervous disorders and eventually he became mentally unbalanced. With so few facts to study, it is difficult to know what he really suffered from. In the eyes of his contemporaries, he changed progressively from 'eccentric' to 'mad' but many elements enter into such judgments and it is not easy to sort them out. To begin with, there is the part played by stereotype: in Chinese literary and art history, certain creations that are more individualist than others are sometimes said to be the work of "cranks", "eccentrics" or "lunatics" (奇人, 怪人 or 狂人). These expressions are flattering, conveying the idea of a sensitive man, free from vulgar and banal tastes. Anticipating their future biographies, scholars and painters often *deliberately* cultivated strange mannerisms and eccentricities but this does not seem to have been the case with Su Renshan, as we will see later. However, this convention may have influenced the writings of his biographers and critics, who perhaps invented later some of the picturesque anecdotes, where the eccentricity ascribed to Su Renshan seems too exemplary to be historically true.

Another factor may have led Su Renshan's contemporaries to think he was "mad". The revolutionary outbursts of this genius' temperament must certainly have caused consternation and scandal in the sleepy, conservative world of a provincial village; worse still, the audacious stand which Su Renshan took up in politics risked bringing catastrophe down, not only on himself but on his entire family and clan. His reputation as a lunatic was a good cloak to cover his crime of rebellion.

It is nevertheless a fact that some of Su Renshan's character traits indicate a really abnormal psychology (obsessive mania for cleanliness, revulsion for women) and the total incoherence of the inscriptions on his last paintings seem to arise from a true mental disorder.

What we learn from Su Renshan's 'autobiography' about his early education, is exactly what one might expect from someone of his social standing: an introduction to written language by learning the *Three Words Classic*, then studying the Confucian Classics first at home and later under the tuition of a master. What

makes him exceptional is his precocious interest in calligraphy and painting. He is certainly not exaggerating when he says his talent had made him locally famous; the earliest works we know<sup>21</sup> show that even when he was an adolescent, he possessed a maturity of technique that experienced artists might have envied.

There is one anecdote that proves his early vocation for painting. When he was six, his mother took him one day to his maternal grandmother's house, for a wedding. In the evening, when everyone sat down to eat, it was noticed that he was missing. People searched for him everywhere and at last he was seen climbing down from the roof—he had been sitting astride the roof-tree, looking at the moon. When he got home the next day he painted a picture, "Contemplating the moon".<sup>22</sup> The fact that his father painted, must certainly have been an incentive encouraging Su Renshan to start but he seems to have been essentially self-taught. (This question is studied in Chapter III, *infra*.)

Once Su Renshan was sixteen, he started seriously to study for the Civil Service examinations. This was the almost exclusive preoccupation and worry of the majority of educated Chinese. These examinations absorbed the best of their energy from adolescence to, often, a fairly advanced age.<sup>23</sup> To understand the extraordinary attraction of this competition, even for the more enlightened, one must realise everything that was at stake. To pass would transform overnight the most obscure and miserable wretch into an influential and prosperous man. These tests alone barred the humblest little nobody from attaining the highest offices of the Empire. It was the only way a gifted and ambitious man could display his talent and family and friends bustled him along this path from the earliest days of his youth. If a son became a mandarin he did not only bring glory to his family, clan and village,<sup>24</sup> but also a host of practical benefits—it gave them the voice of a powerful intercessor, should trouble arise with the administration; impoverished relations came by money to buy land and restore their fortunes; dozens of out-of-work associates found themselves settled in different sinecures or simply went to live off the newly appointed mandarin, as parasites.

Su Renshan failed his examinations twice, once when he was nineteen (1832) and again when he was twenty-two (1835).<sup>25</sup> After the second failure, he abandoned all hope of becoming a mandarin and decided to devote himself to painting, which he had neglected during the years he was studying.

The second failure seems to have marked a definite turning point in Su Renshan's life; apart from leading him to his vocation as a painter, it marked a more fundamental change—the beginning of a divergence, leading him away from those around him. While he still hoped to integrate himself within the existing social and political order, through the examinations, he retained certain illusions about it but now he rebelled and his divorce from society increased with the years. He became aggressively non-conformist and eccentric and outspoken in his seditious criticism of the Manchus. His revolt isolated him and put him into direct conflict with his family. In the end it was his father, the representative par excellence of the traditional authority which Su Renshan was desperately trying to defy, who quelled his revolt and hailed a victory for order. Su Renshan was to die in prison and his work to perish and be lost in the dust of history.

It is quite possible that it was failing his examinations which precipitated the mental instability underlying the whole of the last part of his career, both the dramatic and the creative aspects of it. One should not, in any case, underestimate the trauma which this failure could produce. The violence of the shock was proportionate to the height of the hopes entertained and the disparity between the test itself and all that was at stake was such, that the over-sudden joy of success as much as the despair following a failure could both be enough to unhinge the mind.<sup>26</sup>

A famous example in history can help us to understand the psychological and spiritual crisis into which Su Renshan was plunged at this time. Hong Xiuquan, the future prophet and leader of the Taiping rebellion, failed the examinations in 1843. The destinies of Hong and Su were strikingly similar, as we will see. They were born in the same year, in the same province and both belonged to that ambitious, restless, frustrated class of self-taught village intellectuals which has throughout the ages furnished the rebellious spirits and revolutionary leaders of China. Because of their poverty, they remained in close contact with the masses, while their prestige as scholars conferred on them a natural ascendancy over the peasants. As long as the system held them in harness, dangling hopes of a mandarin's insignia before them, they were harmless, their best energy being spent in pursuit of this gleaming bauble. However, in times of political decadence, the tests were rigged more and more. The examination system was originated to ensure that the most talented candidates were selected and promoted. Eventually, it fell victim to an intellectual sclerosis and the venality of the responsible elite. The system then worked in reverse. By eliminating the brilliant and original minds, accepting only the mediocre, who were docile and conformed to the pedantry of the "eight-legged dissertations", it ended by producing a class of revolutionaries. The case of Hong Xiuquan is an excellent example. It is the shock of failing that led him to discover his vocation as a revolutionary. This is how a modern historian describes the episode:

"In view of the difficulty of the examination, the large number of candidates—sometimes over a thousand—and the small quota of about a dozen who were permitted to pass in these examinations, the failure was not surprising. But with so much at stake, it can easily be understood that the candidates laboured under great nervous strain. Those who failed tried again whenever the examination was held and Hung Hsiu-ch'uan tried several times to pass the examination, the last time in 1843, but he never succeeded. During all this time when he was preparing for the examination, he, like many other student candidates, supported himself by teaching school in his village. He was, then, one of the unsuccessful scholars who were disappointed and frustrated—the marginal group from which in periods of crisis, the leaders or supporters of rebellious movements often came. Men who had not succeeded under the existing system could easily become hostile to it; in their futile attempt to obtain a degree they had gained enough education to organise or direct a political uprising. When Hung failed in another attempt in 1837, he became critically ill. The humiliation of his failure and the realisation of the disappointment he had become to his family and neighbours must have been hard to take and this experience, together with the nervous strain of the examination itself, brought a serious breakdown. He was carried home from Canton and remained delirious for

several days during which time his family regarded him as mad and feared for his life. At times he was unable to recognise others. He talked irrationally and had fits of rage during which he could be restrained only with difficulty. When Hung recovered from his illness, those who knew him felt that his personality as well as his appearance had changed.”<sup>27</sup>

A few years later, Hong Xiuquan, calling upon his mystical hallucinations, started a religious crusade which soon developed into a revolutionary message announcing a new social and political system, “The Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace” (Taiping Tianguo 太平天國). In a matter of a few years, this movement grew to tremendous proportions, its victorious armies sweeping through half the Empire before finally settling in Nanking.

Although Hong Xiuquan, having proclaimed himself the “Heavenly King”, very nearly succeeded in overthrowing the Manchus and seizing the whole of China, by the time he died in his capital (1st June 1864), a few weeks before it fell, he had lost all control of reality and was no more than a demented wreck.

Su Renshan had vanished long before the first Taiping uprising—he probably died mad in prison. He therefore never heard the rousing call of Hong Xiuquan but from what we know of him, he would have responded enthusiastically, all the more so because he himself felt so frustrated and rebellious. The forces motivating him during the years he spent wandering and in retreat had their roots in more than the bitterness caused by failing the examinations. It would be wrong to think that his anti-social behaviour and the frenetic artistic activity in which he seemed to want to bury himself, were just an escape into an ivory tower. Behind his refusal to accept the current social and political system there was a keen awareness of the national drama being played out. Far from immersing himself in the individualism of the pure creator, withdrawn from his times and his surroundings, he meditated on the decadence into which China had been plunged by the despotism of the Manchus and the opportunism of the mandarins and he dreamt of taking part in a movement that would redeem his country.

Painting, for him, was a futile pastime, something to which he took recourse for want of a better activity and he abandoned himself to it in impotent rage, despairing at the hopelessness of his heroic aspirations. The audacity of these dreams nevertheless alarmed those around him and increasingly irritated his father. An inscription on a painting made in 1842 (when he was twenty-nine), gives a good idea of his state of mind:

“ . . . My heart is full of indignation; I dream of being a hero, of redressing wrongs. Why should my plans not succeed? But I’m afraid of offending my parents. I expend the rage in my heart on my futile paintings. I torment myself unceasingly, day and night: I belong entirely to my country and yet here am I, a spectator of this tragedy. . . . ”<sup>28</sup>

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We know very little of what happened to Su Renshan between 1835, when he failed the examinations for the second time and his marriage in 1840. In the first ‘autobiography’ he mentions a journey, made when he was twenty-four, to Cangwu (i.e. Wuzhou 梧州 in Guangxi) (1837) and a visit to the caves of Guilin (provincial

capital of Guangxi) in the following year. Whether these were two successive visits or whether he remained in Guangxi during 1837–1838, is not known. The second ‘autobiography’ only mentions the visit to Guilin and leads us to believe that this journey was undertaken immediately after his second failure in the examinations.

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In 1840, when he was twenty-seven, he married.<sup>29</sup>

There are several curious problems about this marriage. In the *Su Clan Register* (see supra, Note 4) we find the strange sentence: “his wife never crossed his threshold and the marriage was not consummated so he had no descendants.”

The wife’s behaviour alluded to in the *Clan Register*, can probably be explained by a custom current among women in Guangdong and especially in the prefecture of Shunde. Young girls often bind themselves by an “oath of sorority” 結拜姐妹. They establish themselves in small communities, usually silk worm farms, so as to be materially independent. When a girl’s family chooses a husband for her, she vows never to live with him (不落家). The exact import of this vow is difficult to determine. According to some of my informers, who are natives of Shunde, the girls refuse to have any conjugal relationship with the husband and, often with the help and complicity of the ‘sisters’, fiercely oppose any effort made by the husband or family, to try to have the marriage consummated.<sup>30</sup> According to others, the vow only covers permanent cohabitation. After the wedding night, the bride returns to live with her “sisters” as before but visits her husband for a few days at each New Year. These annual visits continue until the girl finds she is pregnant; she then goes and resides permanently with her husband.<sup>31</sup>

The laconic sentence in the *Su Clan Register*, implies that Su Renshan’s wife had made a vow of complete chastity. However, another source,<sup>32</sup> refers to the annual New Year visit. According to this second source, it was Su Renshan himself who was responsible for the marriage not being consummated. Each year before his wife arrived, he slipped away and only reappeared when she had gone. He had such a horror, even of indirect contact with her, that he refused to sleep in the bed she had used until all the bedding had been disinfected. Several authors claim that he never had any dealings with women, placing this alongside his obsessional cleanliness and his vegetarian habits. Jen You-wen thinks he can refute this reputation of continence and quotes four of Su Renshan’s poems, that have sentimental themes.<sup>33</sup> The argument is feeble; it is impossible to draw a conclusion from these poems, written in vague, impersonal terms, treating a very conventional theme in a purely traditional manner.

However, an inscription mentioned by Lee Kwok-wing, from a painting dated 1842 (two years after his marriage), implies that Su Renshan and his wife lived under the same roof: “My mother cries from cold, my wife moans from hunger. I am in the same situation as Han Yu but Han Yu escaped and I am ensnared; Han Yu had stable employment but I have none.”<sup>34</sup> Unfortunately, this painting has disappeared. Lee Kwok-wing obtained the quotation second-hand and no longer remembers its source. Who then do we believe? The *Su Clan Register* which we know is inexact on other points, unverifiable oral traditions of old people from

Shunde or the hypothetical evidence of a painting that has now disappeared and which no one ever remembers seeing? Like so many other details of Su Renshan's life, we will probably never know.

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Once he had given up preparing for the Civil Service examinations, Su Renshan, having now renounced all worldly ambitions, seems to have taken to a vagabond life, defying social conventions more and more.

He seems to have had no fixed lodging. We know that for a time he lived in Daliang 大良, the most important town in Shunde, and that he spent a long time in Foshan 佛山 (Nanhai prefecture).<sup>35</sup> He must also have spent several periods in Canton (the 1841 autobiographical inscription was made in Canton).

What did he live on? Jen You-wen thinks he has proof that for a time Su Renshan was a teacher. It is true that people who had failed the Civil Service examination often ended up as teachers. Hong Xiuquan spent several years in this profession<sup>36</sup> but there is no proof that Su Renshan taught. Jen You-wen's conclusion is based on three expressions (硯田, 有硯可耕田, 筆畊硯畹) which Su Renshan used to describe his activities. In fact, the meaning of these terms is literally "to live by one's brush" and they are far from implying the specific work of teaching; they cover a range of intellectual, artistic and literary activities. In Su Renshan's case they probably refer to painting and this interpretation is clearly indicated by the context of one of the expressions.<sup>37</sup>

In principle the ethics of the painter-scholar forbade him to make money out of his work—he sank to the level of the artisan if he did. However, this was quite a flexible rule. Nothing prevented a painter from accepting presents from an amateur to whom he then gave a few paintings.<sup>38</sup> As for the edifying tales where Su Renshan is said to have let out a peal of laughter and refused piles of gold sent to him by rich admirers who thus hoped to obtain his paintings, they are mere conventional hagiography where historical truth plays no part, as we will show later.

Su Renshan's paintings seem to have been popular in his region. Apparently, in former times many tea-houses of Shunde displayed his work.<sup>39</sup> No doubt, this notoriety was due less to appreciation of the real artistic merit of his work than to his reputation as a local eccentric and this popular success probably brought him no more material gain than Utrillo's in the cafés of Montmartre.

Most chroniclers stress his ferociously independent character but it seems that despite his whimsical and savage moods, he gained the favour and esteem of many notables of the region. We know, for instance, that he spent a long time at the home of Liang Jiutu 梁九圖 in Foshan. Liang, who was an official and an amateur painter of some talent, belonged to a distinguished Shunde family of mandarins and scholars.<sup>40</sup> Long Yuanfen 龍元份, an influential scholar of Shunde, also claims to have been his friend and held him in high esteem.<sup>41</sup> A member of the Wen 溫 clan, one of the most influential families of Shunde, avidly sought his paintings.<sup>42</sup> One might also recall that Su Renshan's father was an employee of the prefecture of Nanhai. With these connections, no man was likely to starve; he could always live off his parents and relations, without having to bother about finding stable employment.

However, this was a precarious existence, especially for a man of Su Renshan's temperament. Common though it was for poor intellectuals, poets and painters to live as the parasites of rich businessmen and mandarins, they were at least expected to show humility, to be obsequious, and Su Renshan was incapable of this. A certain amount of unconventional behaviour was not only tolerated but encouraged among these 'clients' but it was a very respectable sort of deviation. Such permitted and deliberate eccentricity always knew how far to go; it flattered the tastes of the elite, bred a stereotyped nonconformity and pleasantly boosted the feeling of belonging to a superior level of humanity free from vulgarity.<sup>43</sup> Su Renshan's eccentricity was of quite another metal, so undesigned and authentic that it was eventually thought necessary to lock him up. . .

Long before he had reached this extreme, his natural taciturnity, lack of sociability and introversion had already condemned him to a lonely and difficult life. The inscription written when he was twenty-nine (1842) and quoted above, shows that he suffered material hardship ("My mother cries from cold; my wife moans from hunger. I am in the same situation as Han Yu but Han Yu escaped and I am ensnared; Han Yu had stable employment but I have none.") This inscription is perplexing because from other sources, it seems unlikely that Su Renshan was living with his wife and furthermore, it is difficult to imagine how the way of life he had chosen for himself could possibly influence his mother's material conditions. All sources, however, confirm that Su Renshan led a precarious and frugal life.

Tradition describes Su Renshan dressed as a peasant, in rags that had been patched and repatched but, because of his obsession for cleanliness, always immaculate. He was strictly vegetarian, ate at whim and was content with very little: ". . . tattered and hairy, he used to turn up unexpectedly in the middle of a meal, at the house of one or another of his relatives. He would pick up three or four mouthfuls of some dish then declare he was full. Sometimes he just helped himself to a little fruit from someone's orchard and this served instead of a meal."<sup>44</sup> As far as we know, he was greedy about only one thing but this greed must have taken legendary proportions because nearly all writers mention it: he had a passion for onions marinated in ginger (a sort of pickles very popular in Guangdong). His face was stern, he was "yellow and emaciated like an old monk"; he hardly ever smiled and was extremely taciturn. A great reader, he spent days on end buried in his books. He never opened his mouth unless spoken to and then often contented himself with staring vacantly at his interlocutor, remaining stupidly dumb. To those around him, he seemed to be idiotic. His absent air was in fact probably an effect of his extraordinary powers of inner concentration. His capacity for shutting off the outside world is the topic of many anecdotes. Once, when he was staying with Liang Jiutu, he settled down to paint. A terrible thunderstorm broke out and the house was struck by lightning, the thunderbolt entering the room in which Su Renshan was sitting. The whole household was in an uproar—he alone was quite unperturbed and continued painting. When he was later asked how he had managed to maintain his calm, he replied: "I was working out the composition of a landscape and didn't notice anything."<sup>45</sup> Another story tells how he was once invited to a dinner in a neighbouring village. He consented to go but on the night of the dinner, his host waited for him in vain. Eventually, everyone sat down to dine without

him. At dawn, when the banquet was over, a guest returning home met Su Renshan sitting by the roadside. He asked him what he was doing and why he had not come to the feast. Su explained that on his way there, he had seen a storm; the flashes of lightning playing on the sea spray created such a marvellous spectacle, that he could not draw himself away from it.<sup>46</sup>

Such behaviour can hardly have improved his social relations. He reduced these to a minimum, avoiding official circles and rarely going into town. The peasant dress he adopted shows his indifference to the social world. He was not arrogant but in his relationships with others he showed the intransigence of the solitary. However, he was very affable with humble people. A remarkable detail—on one of his paintings,<sup>47</sup> he mentions the name of the craftsman who mounted the work. As far as I know, this gesture is without precedent in the annals of Chinese painting. His paintings rarely bear a dedication. Of the more than three hundred I have studied, only a dozen have names in the inscriptions and none of the people mentioned was ever well-known or influential.<sup>48</sup> This shows not only that he was far from ambitious but also that as a painter he was independent, in contrast to Su Liupeng, for example, who worked on order and took into account the tastes of his public. Su Renshan painted for himself alone.

The only acquaintances he seems to have liked were a few old monks (Buddhism must have deeply affected his thought and inspired many of his paintings). At the time he was living in Daliang, he paid frequent visits to the Huimu 卉木精舍 and Ehu 鵝湖 hermitages. The Ehu hermitage was the foundation of the temple of Xiashan 峽山寺, dating from the Song period and held memories of many Ming loyalists, who took refuge there after the fall of that dynasty. Li Jian 黎簡 (1747–1799), whose work had a strong influence on Su Renshan, had also spent a long time there.<sup>49</sup>

Su Renshan had a great love of Nature. He liked to wander alone in the wild stretches of country east of Daliang. Sometimes, he would take provisions with him and disappear for several days, camping where he could on the hillsides or in the forests.<sup>50</sup>

In one inscription, he complains of spiritual isolation: “People think I deride the world for amusement but how could they understand me? I haven’t a single real friend and my only acquaintances are people from Antiquity.”<sup>51</sup> Those around him however must have had good reason for thinking he “derided the world for his own amusement”. There are many tales of his eccentric behaviour. Long Yuan-fen, a Shunde celebrity already mentioned above, once invited him to his son’s wedding. Su Renshan arrived wearing a ragged tunic and a peasant’s reed cape and straw hat. The doorman did not want to admit him but the master of the house caught sight of him at the gate and led him up to the place of honour. Su Renshan casually accepted this homage and sat down, without a glance at the other guests.<sup>52</sup> In another story, we find him behaving even more unconventionally. A descendant of Wen Rugua 溫汝适,<sup>53</sup> living in Longshan, was fond of Su Renshan’s paintings and very much wanted to possess one. He dispatched messengers with gold but Su Renshan refused his offer and laughing at the messengers, sent them back. However, a little later, Su Renshan went to Longshan and presented himself at Wen’s door, dressed as usual in his tattered clothes. Without



deigning to answer the doorman who asked his name, he walked straight through to the private apartments of the master of the house, saw a comfortable sofa in a studio and settled down on it. He spent the entire day lying there, without once opening his mouth. When evening came, seeing that the table had been laid for a banquet, he sat down in the place of honour, although he still had not been introduced to the master of the house or to the guests. He refused meat but fed ravenously on the vegetables within his reach and ate up all the pickles. The host began to suspect who he was and ordered a dish of onions marinated in ginger. Su Renshan threw himself on it emptying the dish in no time, washing it down with a cupful of wine. At this point, all doubt as to his identity was removed. Ink, brushes and paper were brought and placed at his side. Finally, having eaten and drunk his fill, Su Renshan took up the brush and started to paint. As soon as he finished a painting, he tore it up then began another. He teased them with this game for several days! Wen left him to his caprice, treated him with great respect and was as patient as could be. In the end, this touched Su Renshan and he made about ten paintings, inscribing each with a dedication praising the generous spirit and bounty of his host.<sup>54</sup>

This last anecdote calls for some comment. Its veracity is doubtful and we can really only extract a few generalities: that Su Renshan's behaviour was so eccentric that it became legendary, that he was notorious in his own locality and that even at this time, his painting was attracting the attention of certain influential local connoisseurs. For the rest, the tale is implausible in so many places that it is hardly necessary to point them out. However keen the interest of these amateurs, it is hard to imagine one of them offering large sums of money and submitting himself to dire humiliation, just to obtain the work of some young local artist. Only in very special cases, when the artist held a high social or political position and his work was esteemed by the intelligentsia of the entire country, did the work of a living painter hold much worth.<sup>55</sup> Above all, it is very unlikely that Su Renshan could have turned up at a rich mansion dressed as a beggar and impudently snubbed the entire household for a whole day, without being thrown out by the servants. The whole episode is too romantic.

As a tale, the anecdote does not lack interest: it serves as a good illustration of the method used by some traditional art historians. Chinese writers of history resorted to a large stock of "exemplary anecdotes" and "robot portraits" for their work.<sup>56</sup> If they had insufficient information about an artist, they turned to the stock and selected a series of "typical features" which were then varied and adapted according to the author's opinion of the man. So, instead of deducing generalities from given facts, the history writer performed the inverse operation: starting with a few abstract ideas, he proceeded to embellish these in order to create lively and substantial fiction. His method was essentially that of a novelist; instead of telling us briefly what he knew and what he surmised about his subject, he tried to bring him to life for us. In the anecdote mentioned above, the manner in which the tale begins with Su Renshan refusing the money of a rich patron, is classic and commonplace. The way he takes up his brush after being served his favourite dish, is also a feature that has precedent (there is a famous story about Zheng Bangiao, where he gives in to the entreaties of an admirer after being served a dish of dogmeat, for

which he had a legendary weakness). Su Renshan's manner of testing his admirer by behaving like a country oaf, then submitting him to public humiliation, is an even older archetype. It appears in a hundred different guises, from the level of folk story to the philosophical fable or religious chronicle. In the former, we find the "cloak and dagger" novels (武俠小說) where there is an apprentice swordsman and an old master (usually a hairy, taciturn recluse) who reveals the secret of the supreme thrust only when the apprentice has passed through a series of trials, which test his constancy, modesty and perspicacity. In the latter, an apprentice sage seeking truth or the novice monk searching for illumination, are similarly submitted to the enigmatic, brutal or sarcastic rebuffs of the master whose guidance they want. This myth of search triumphing through humiliation finds its earliest expression in the works of the ancient historiographers, as is quite natural in a country like China, where history performs the function played by mythology in other civilisations. In the *Three Kingdoms*, the famous episode where Zhuge Liang twice avoids meeting Liu Bei, in order to test his character and intentions, is already a later variation of the classical theme found in Sima Qian's *Biographies in Historical Records*: this is the basic collection of 'exemplary anecdotes' and its eloquent models have profoundly influenced Chinese psychology and literary imagination. As an example, there is the story of Zhang Liang or, more telling still, the passage in the tale of the Lord of Xinling, where he meets the hermit Houying—these are a kind of prototype of the meeting between the notable, Wen, and Su Renshan.<sup>57</sup>

In all historical research, especially that of art history, one should bear in mind, when referring to sources, this Chinese peculiarity of interpreting history in the light of prototype examples. This can be the more misleading because the true nature of their method, both conventional and abstract, is hidden beneath a solid, factual, colourful exterior. The prototype anecdotes themselves, however, sometimes correspond to historical fact. The tales affected the imagination of some scholars so strongly, that they incorporated them into their own behaviour.<sup>58</sup> Certain eccentric traits, borrowed from age to age by different painters, were therefore not always mere biographical conventions—men quite deliberately adopted an odd behaviour consciously imitating an older prototype. This still happens today among Chinese painters, wishing not only to imitate an illustrious artist from antiquity but also to adorn their own future biographies. Typical examples, are Pu Xinyu's 溥心畬 legendary weakness for Shanghai fresh-water crabs, Fu Baoshi's 傅抱石 drunkenness, Zhang Dagian's 張大千 affected habit of wearing a Song gown (we know that in the Song period, Me Fei wore Tang dress). There is no question but that Pu Hsinyu really did love fresh-water crabs and Fu Baoshi his wine. What is interesting is the manner of *stylising* their favourite pastimes: Pu Hsinyu became famous for the annual trip he made from Taiwan to Hong Kong each autumn, when the fresh-water crabs first appeared on the market and Fu Baoshi had a special seal which he impressed on the paintings he made under the influence of wine.

At first sight, the singular and colourful details that abound in painters' biographies give them a very lively and personal touch (some of the biographies consist exclusively of picturesque details and contain no historical information

whatsoever). Taken at its face value, mention of Su Renshan's mania for cleanliness seems to reveal a significant feature of his psychology. However, when we find *the same compulsion* attributed to Ni Zan, in the Yuan dynasty and to Mi Fei in the Song, and even today we find such and such a painter or aesthete affecting a similar mania, imitating these illustrious models, one becomes a bit sceptical. It is always possible that Su Renshan, Ni Zan and Mi Fei were all obsessed by hygiene and it is not impossible that one or more of them cultivated this habit to imitate a painter from antiquity. It is also possible that, especially in the case of Ni Zan or Su Renshan, about whom there is very little accurate historical information, this obsession was a conclusion of the biographer's. In the case of Ni Zan, this is particularly likely because the paintings of this Yuan master have a limpid, distant coldness suggesting a thirst for purity. It should be mentioned at this point that a basic axiom of the traditional theory of aesthetics is that an artist reveals his character and his morality in his paintings. (In calligraphy, for scholars, closely related to painting, there is a whole literature on the subject, inferring not only precise details and signs of the spiritual character of the author from his work but even descriptions of his physical appearance and of his constitution.) When a Chinese historian lacks information about an artist, he builds up a portrait of his personality and physical appearance by making deductions from his paintings. Thus, for example, when a painter like Fan Kuan (about whom we know practically nothing) is described as a solitary man, with a severe and majestic countenance, he is simply having attributed to him the mien of his mountains. . . . This custom may also have been brought into play to describe Su Renshan. Tradition tells us that he was as yellow and emaciated as an old monk, that he was vegetarian and was wont to visit monasteries but we will never know to what extent this was true and what was extrapolated by critics from the ascetic, linear character of his brush strokes and the recurrence of Buddhist themes in his painting.

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Two inscriptions attest to the fact that in 1841 (i.e. when he was twenty-eight years old) Su Renshan was in Canton.<sup>59</sup> Later inscriptions which simultaneously indicate the place and date of a painting, are as follows: 1843, in Cangwu (i.e. Wuzhou in Guangxi);<sup>60</sup> 1847, in Cangwu;<sup>61</sup> 1849, "in the yamen of Shunde"<sup>62</sup>—this inscription is on Su Renshan's last dated painting.

Previously, a number of important events in Su Renshan's life were known but could not be arranged in chronological sequence: his long stay in Foshan at the home of Liang Jiutu; the quarrel with his parents; his imprisonment, in the yamen of Shunde. It is now possible to fix the dates of these scattered incidents:

—the sojourn in Liang Jiutu's house in Foshan was probably around 1839–1840, between his return from Guilin and his marriage (?).<sup>63</sup>

—the quarrel with his parents must have entered a first acute phase in 1841–1842. Three inscriptions seem to indicate this.<sup>64</sup>

—from the last three dated inscriptions, where the place in which the picture was painted is also mentioned (i.e. 1843, Cangwu; 1847, Cangwu; 1849, yamen of Shunde), we can hypothesise on the last stages of his life. After quarreling with his family in 1841–1842, the atmosphere in and around his home suffocated him, so he

escaped and returned to Guangxi (where he had already once before sought refuge, after failing his examinations the second time). He stayed there more or less continuously from 1843 to 1847, basing himself in Cangwu. Around 1848 (???) he returned to Shunde. This renewal of contact with his family was catastrophic—the old conflict flared up again, maybe because of a specific incident (we will investigate this further on). On his father's initiative, Su Renshan was finally imprisoned in the yamen of Shunde. He spent the year 1849 in captivity and died (in prison?) towards its close or early the following year. He was then thirty-five or thirty-six (according to the western way of counting age).

Concerning Su Renshan's imprisonment, tradition gives conflicting accounts on all but one point: he was arrested because his father denounced him, accusing him of "filial impiety" 不孝之罪 or "rebellion against the order of the family" 逆倫.

What were the grounds for this accusation? Why did Su Renshan's father resort to such an extreme measure? Here tradition gives diverging accounts and we will have to examine each of the various explanations.

I. A local mandarin (according to some, a Manchu), perhaps he was even the prefect of Shunde, wished to have one of Su Renshan's paintings and advanced a considerable sum of money to the father for it. Su Renshan refused to give a painting. The father, fearing a refusal would offend the mandarin and damage his own position, flew into a rage and had Renshan imprisoned. The most detailed account of this version is given by Chen Tieer 陳鐵兒.<sup>65</sup> According to him, the father had already lost two-thirds of the money gambling. Being unable either to provide the promised painting or return the money, he tried to divert the storm gathering over his own head by delivering up his son. According to another version, also related by Chen Tieer, the prefect of Shunde wanted Su Renshan to paint him a picture entitled "Promotion of a mandarin" (!) and to ensure that the artist would comply with his wishes, he detained the father, threatening to release him only when the painting was in his hands. Su Renshan refused to be blackmailed. His father, outraged by his son's indifference, bargained with the prefect and obtained his own freedom by offering to deliver Renshan to him under a false accusation of filial impiety. Once the prefect had the artist at his mercy, he could easily persuade him to execute the required painting.<sup>66</sup>

Li Fanfu tells an analogous tale but places it in an earlier period of Su Renshan's life. One day, the father on returning home from the prefecture, placed ten ounces of silver on the table. This money had been given to him by the prefect, to engage the services of Su Renshan to paint a picture. (Note how the chroniclers, with the true instinct of a novelist, replace a vague, abstract fact by a material one: Li Fanfu specifically says ten ounces; Chen Tieer states with equal aplomb that there were three hundred pieces of coin 三百金 . . .). Several days went by and Su Renshan left the money untouched on the table. When his father pressed him to start work, Su Renshan retorted " . . . my paintings are not merchandise." Fury of the father. Fearing the prefect's reprisals, Su Renshan flees to Guilin. Li Fanfu adds "he was twenty-four years old at this time", wishing to tie the episode to Su Renshan's first journey to Guangxi. However, the connection seems quite arbitrary. Note again the 'exemplary' character of Li Fanfu's version. Such behaviour, where the artist flees rather than submit to the pestering demands of a mandarin

or compromise his dignity, could well be the projection of a classical model, perhaps best illustrated in the first chapter of the *Unofficial Chronicle of the Literati* 儒林外史, the idealised biography of Wang Mian 王冕.

Finally, Su Ruohu 蘇若瑚, the most serious of these chroniclers, gives a much more laconic version of the affair, doubtlessly closer to the truth: "... the father of Su Renshan had widely assorted connections and constantly pressed Su Renshan into painting pictures for these various friends. Renshan either did not finish the paintings in time or did not paint them at all. Eventually, his father found some excuse for accusing him of 'filial impiety' and had him thrown into prison. Su Renshan spent a long time in captivity without obtaining freedom."<sup>67</sup> It is remarkable that the oldest and best informed source (Su Ruohu was born in 1856 and was also a native of Shunde, and furthermore, he was one of the first and rare local connoisseurs who showed interest in Su Renshan's work after his death), is also the most abstract and concise; the further we are removed from his death, the more is tradition embellished with dramatic peripeties, colourful and material detail. The genesis of myth! . . .

To conclude, Su Renshan's father, like a good factotum of the yamen, was probably both an opportunist and a sycophant, avidly seeking the good graces of the local dignitaries. With this in mind, he took advantage of his son's artistic talents. Su Renshan's indifference to worldly ambitions, his casual attitude and unconventional behaviour must often have upset his father's plans, much to the latter's irritation. In traditional Chinese society, the paterfamilias had absolute authority and children were morally obliged to attune their own lives and careers to the increase of the parents' social prestige. Su Renshan's refusal to play his father's game therefore looked like unjustified and intolerable insubordination. Su Renshan's attitude of non-cooperation certainly added to the discord already existing between him and his father but there is nevertheless a wide gulf between this and the act of throwing his son into prison. It is hard to believe that alone, it could provide sufficient reason for incarcerating him.

II. Second explanation: the second wife of Su Yinshou coveted the property of Renshan. In order to obtain it more easily, she persuaded her husband to have Renshan arrested under a false accusation of filial impiety. Nearly all authors mention this but none take it very seriously. The story is in fact hard to believe. With his father alive, what could he have owned? As he had no official post, he had no personal income; he was himself a dependent of the family and as far as we know, he lived frugally and precariously. In the inscription of 1842 (see *supra*, note 64), he mentions "the disarray" in his "family affairs", which prevented him from pursuing his high ideals and constantly preyed on his mind. The inscription continues with a reference to the Confucian attitude towards material goods, that these should be collective property: "The saint should not want to own anything, not even a hair; under these conditions, goods abandoned by the roadside would not disappear."<sup>68</sup> This inscription suggests that family problems and troubles over money and property, worries which preoccupied Su Renshan even in 1842 and may have been the cause of his flight to Guangxi, were the main source of friction with his parents. It then remains to reconcile the existence of this *step-mother* who coveted Su Renshan's *property*, with the inscription, already quoted twice above,

in which Su Renshan lets it be understood that he is living in *destitution* and that his *mother* shares his poverty. Trying to arrange the pieces of this puzzle in a coherent and logical pattern, would be too hazardous an enterprise and the facts we possess are too fragmentary, ambiguous and vague.

III. Some writers claim that Su Renshan's father had him imprisoned for madness. Did Su Renshan finally become really mad? The total incoherence of his last inscriptions makes it seem likely. Some of the paintings, including some of his greatest masterpieces,<sup>69</sup> border on the type of deliquescence which, according to psychiatrists, is characteristic of the art of schizophrenics. The calligraphy of some inscriptions<sup>70</sup> might possibly provide supplementary clues but a diagnosis must be left to specialists. One might nevertheless add that these characteristic features, deliquescent graphic expression, the disturbing anarchical violence of the calligraphy, the incoherent inscriptions, do not necessarily appear in conjunction. On his very last dated painting (*Landscape in imitation of Li Sixun*, 1849, see Cat. 27, Plate 53), the inscription is incoherent but written in a neat and firm hand; the landscape itself, executed entirely in a linear style is well planned and has a strict and clear logic. An album also dated this same year, 1849, (see Cat. 32-55, Plates 54-57) presents pages showing admirable firmness and a purely linear style while there are others whose raw violence makes one flinch.

Whatever Su Renshan's mental state, it is nevertheless difficult to see how his madness could have led to the imposition of such a severe penalty.

IV. Su Renshan must have shown openly his anti-Manchu feeling. This rebellion, of the worst possible kind, risked the ruin of his entire family and clan by the reprisals it could incur. Anticipating this disaster, his father expelled him from the clan and had him imprisoned, either under pretext of madness or of insubordination and filial impiety.<sup>71</sup>

Was Su Renshan a rebel in the political sense of the word? One writer affirms that he was a champion of the Taiping rebellion.<sup>72</sup> But this is impossible. Hong Xiuguan's activities had no publicity and were strictly limited to a few peasant communities deep in the heart of Guangxi, until the Jintian uprising in 1851. Su Renshan could never even have heard of the movement. However, the stupendous rate at which the Taiping insurrection developed and swept across South China, a bare year or two after Su Renshan's death, tells a lot about the political climate there during his lifetime. In 1851, in Jintian in Guangxi (had Su Renshan lived, he would have been thirty-eight years old), Hong Xiuguan openly defied the Manchus, proclaiming himself "Heavenly Sovereign" of a new order, "The Heavenly Kingdom of Supreme Peace"; he had 20,000 supporters. Two years later, with a following of a million men, he seized Nanking and held it as his capital! The prophetic magnetism of Hong Xiuguan himself, explains nothing; he was channelling all the latent force of revolutionary feeling, widespread among the peasants and even more among the ambitious, frustrated and destitute scholars of the middle-class, a category to which he himself, like Su Renshan, belonged. It was men like this who supplied most of the members of the cadres of the Taiping movement. Had Su Renshan not died so early, he would no doubt have felt tempted to join the uprising. The movement appealed to intellectuals not so much because of the vague mysticism inherent in it but because it was anti-Manchu and provided

a programme for destroying the hopelessly sclerotic political, moral and social system which the Manchus enforced.

We know little of the thought of Su Renshan. The only source of information is his inscriptions. It would be presumptuous and pointless to try to deduce a coherent system of thought from these texts—disparate, discontinuous and often obscure. He had an inquiring mind and death interrupted his intellectual and artistic experiments before he could attain the full maturity of his genius.

It is evident from his inscriptions that Su Renshan was astonishingly learned in the Classics. His learning was stamped by the years he had spent preparing for the civil service examinations (some long inscriptions on his paintings are phrased in the style of those 'political dissertations' 策論, the form of which had been derived mainly from Song essayists and which had again become an examination subject under the Qing). However, his intellectual curiosity went beyond the requirements of the mandarin examinations. In ancient philosophy, he favoured the Taoists and he took great pleasure in quoting Zhuang Zi's sarcastic remarks about Confucius.<sup>73</sup> His attitude towards Confucianism is ambiguous but in the final analysis, his feelings seem to be divided between a genuine admiration for the teachings of the Sage and a strong aversion for the hypocrisy of the professional Confucianists, who had twisted the doctrine to suit their own political aims and who oppressed the people. The existing political system inspired him only with bitterness and disgust. Not uncommonly, he fostered a nostalgia for a past golden age, a peasant and patriarchal utopia. Significantly, among contemporary society he esteemed doctors above all others, because their science was life-giving whereas the power of Confucian mandarins was used to cause suffering.<sup>74</sup> He was also interested in Buddhism, which inspired such a large number of his paintings<sup>75</sup> that some critics, who knew nothing of the numerous other aspects of his work, classified him as a "painter of Buddhist figures". Finally, as attested by an inscription on a fan,<sup>76</sup> chance or curiosity led him to go one day and listen to the preaching of western, Christian missionaries. In all intellectual exercise, he showed a very open mind and was in no way bound by conventional rules of decency and compunction. This is strikingly apparent in the inscription on a landscape, painted on the occasion of his cousin's marriage.<sup>77</sup> Here he associates a theory of the sexual act (described in colourful Cantonese dialect), with the holy testimony of the Classics. It seems unlikely that this inscription, the irreverence of which must have seemed sacrilegious, was an isolated example—we might recall "the many errors committed in word and deed" to which he himself refers at the end of the autobiographical inscription written in 1841. However, other paintings or items of this nature were probably hidden or destroyed by his family and friends.

Returning to his political views, we should first mention that politics were one of his major preoccupations. He was intensely conscious of China's condition, of the humiliation, decadence and corruption inflicted by her foreign rulers. His mind was haunted by dreams of heroic feats. Beside these dreams of action, his painting seemed an absurd pastime. He clearly reveals this state of mind in the 1842 inscription quoted above. There are recurring inscriptions dealing with matters of political philosophy throughout his work. This is unusual in Chinese painting and seems odd in his case, because the inscriptions rarely bear any relation to the subject-

matter of the paintings on which they occur. There is one amazing example, on a landscape painting in Lee Kwok-wing's collection (Cat. 250, Plate 13): the lower half of the picture is taken up by a landscape in his freehand style—a small island, a few trees, a light craft carried on the water's stream and in the distance, a vague mountainous horizon—all executed with casual, nonchalant brush strokes. Contrasting with the ethereal whiteness and emptiness of this part of the work, the upper half is cluttered with the closely-written calligraphy of a long dissertation, profuse and fevered, invading all the available space, barely leaving a margin and pressing down on the very horizon of the landscape. The composition of this work is perhaps analogous of Su Renshan's state of mind—he was painting in an abstracted manner while concentrating on a train of thought, far removed from the progress of his painting.<sup>78</sup>

Now to what extent were Su Renshan's political views seditious and likely to have alienated him from those around him? The 1842 inscription tells us in no ambiguous terms that it was only the thought of displeasing his parents that hindered him from carrying out the heroic feats of which he dreamed. Today, we have virtually no material evidence of his anti-Manchu sentiments. There is only an inscription (*Figure on Horseback*, Cat. 112), where the expression 'Manqing' 滿清, a very insolent term of disrespect, is used to describe the Manchu dynasty, and a seal (sole occurrence on *Landscape*, Cat. 73) bearing the inscription "Princely descendant of the Hans" 漢王孫, displaying his nationalist resentment of the occupiers. But this is very meagre evidence.<sup>79</sup> One author who had occasion to make enquiries in the region<sup>80</sup> furthermore adds that his rebelliousness is not once mentioned in any of the explanations offered by local people as to why he was imprisoned.

Absence of written evidence on this matter, however, and the silence of local tradition, in no way weakens our hypothesis of his revolutionary attitude. The presence of a rebel placed a clan or village in such peril that everything would have been done to hide all trace of his activity,<sup>81</sup> even of his existence. According to some people, the elders of his clan encouraged Su Yinshou to forge the accusation of filial impiety, aimed at neutralising Su Renshan. As an extra precaution, he would have been expelled by the clan, so that in the future, it would always be dissociated from his dangerous undertakings and avoid the disasters of a collective reprisal.

In the light of this, the curse which oppressed the memory of Su Renshan and the posthumous destiny of his art, can be more easily explained. Of course, his painting had an aggressive originality which could hardly have found grace among people of conventional tastes, but aesthetic reasons alone are insufficient to justify the conspiracy of silence built up around the man and his work. Further, we know that during his lifetime he was quite widely acclaimed in his region. How can we reconcile this fact to the silence later observed by all official sources of information and by local aesthetes, until the end of the 19th century? How was it that after his death, not one friend or colleague nor a single scholar from his native town, commemorated his career in some short obituary? Even his own family register only supplies a brief, vague note about him. Early in the 20th century, a local chronicler (Xian Baogan, already mentioned above) gives him only a passing mention; the most noted specialist of the history of Cantonese painting (Wang Zhaoyong)



deliberately refuses to include him in a catalogue that was supposed to be exhaustive. This might be explained if during his lifetime, Su Renshan had been a quaint, obscure person, but the truth was quite the contrary. Even if his contemporaries were unable to recognise fully his genius, his precocious talent, his wide learning and his eccentric behaviour must have been strikingly conspicuous, especially in such a provincial environment. So why was this veil drawn over his memory? It really seems as though his name had become taboo. A vacuum had to be created around this leper. And was the law he had violated only of a political nature? There is one last explanation, so scandalous that authors as conscientious as Lee Kwok-wing and Jen You-wen have *deliberately refused to mention it*<sup>82</sup> but one which will give us a final glimpse of this enigma, under a very different guise.

V. Su Renshan was involved, either as a victim or a guilty partner, in an unmentionable impeachment of morals within his own family. Three types of rumour exist.

—Su Yinshou coveted Renshan's wife and in order to have free access to her, sent his son to prison under one of the pretexts mentioned above (madness, insubordination, filial impiety).<sup>83</sup>

—Su Renshan had an incestuous affair with his step-mother (his father's second wife). The existence of this rumour is incidentally revealed by Chen Tier, who, having described Su Renshan's abhorrence for his wife, even of any indirect contact with her, continues "... throughout his life, he was abstinent and kept his distance from women. *Some say he had an incestuous relationship with his father's second wife and that his father discovered this* but because of the character traits mentioned above, we can safely deny this accusation." For Chen, whose intention was only to vindicate Su Renshan, the fact that he was a vegetarian like a monk and insisted on disinfecting the bedding in which his wife had slept, was sufficient proof of his chastity. However, even though Chen only mentioned the rumour to refute it, he reveals that *there was a relatively current oral tradition in Shunde, stating that Su Renshan did have an affair with his step-mother*. We have already come across this step-mother in the more academic accounts of his imprisonment:<sup>84</sup> hoping to appropriate the Su inheritance for herself, she instigates the father to imprison his son. We have shown that this story is unlikely—Su Renshan does not seem to have possessed any fortune—but maybe one element should be retained: the step-mother played an important role in this drama. The role of an accomplice, victim or that of a Potiphar's wife?

—Su Renshan had an incestuous affair with his sister. This rumour was picked up by Lee Kwok-wing, heard from the lips of Liu Xiaoyun 劉筱雲, a doctor who was a native of Shunde. Lee communicated the information to me orally and attaches some credit to it but thought it was too shocking to be mentioned in his monograph.

These three versions, between which it is impossible to choose, converge on one point: that a scandal erupted in Su Renshan's family. Despite all efforts to muffle up the affair, some knowledge of it leaked to the outside world, giving birth to the three different rumours. Su Renshan was directly concerned in the scandal, either the principal victim or the partner with the greatest guilt and this sent him to prison.

The five explanations of Su Renshan's imprisonment which we have studied are not exclusive. It is impossible to decide exactly why Su Yinshou sent Renshan into captivity but through the prism of these different lenses, we at least get an idea of the factors leading to his alienation from his clan and of the reason why, in the eyes of posterity, he was transformed into an enigmatic and scandalous figure.

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The date when Su Renshan entered prison has been the subject of various hypotheses. Li Tianma thought it was soon after 1841, when Su Renshan, then twenty-eight years old, confessed to have repented of the mysterious "errors" of which he had been guilty "in word and deed". Lee Kwok-wing thinks he entered prison when he was thirty, i.e. around 1843. However, an inscription on a painting possessed by Jen You-wen *Lie Zi in a landscape* (Cat. 14, Plate 15), that Lee had not been able to examine, states that Su Renshan was in Cangwu in 1843. Previously, Jen You-wen thought he was imprisoned towards the end of 1846 but he later revised this theory, in the light of information on one of the album leaves in the Suma collection. It is here attested that Su Renshan was still in Cangwu in 1847. The inscription on the *Landscape in imitation of Li Sixun* (Cat. 27, Plate 53) on which "in the yamen of Shunde" is written, is dated 1849 and shows that in this year, he was in prison.<sup>85</sup> He must therefore have been arrested in 1848 or 1849.

It is amazing that he seems to have accepted his fate without a murmur of protest, showing total indifference to this dramatic climax. Soaring above the contingencies of life, he spent his days painting, in a state of peace as if nothing had happened. The gaolers enjoyed his painting and kept him supplied with paper, brushes and ink. When he felt inspired, he could execute ten paintings one after the other but at other times he would refuse to touch his brushes and entreaties were useless. One day, after the prison walls had been newly whitewashed, he amused himself by writing calligraphy on it, to the fury of the warden, who had the inscription wiped off. When he painted for the gaolers, they were obliged to remove the paper at a certain point, because he was unable to stop painting and continued to add brush strokes until the original picture was obliterated. His imprisonment does not therefore seem to have held up his artistic work.<sup>86</sup>

How long did he spend in prison? Li Fan-fu thinks he was there for seven or eight years. Another source (highly questionable) claims he was condemned to a ten year sentence.<sup>87</sup> Su Ruohu (quoted above) simply says "he spent a long time in prison without obtaining a release". Lee Kwok-wing thinks he was in fact liberated after some time and that his stay in Foshan, at the home of Liang Jiutu was after he left prison. These different opinions arise from the fact that these authors had been unable to consult the paintings of the Suma collection and those of Jen You-wen. Inscriptions on these paintings show that Su Renshan was in prison in 1849, that is, at the very end of his career and that the earliest date when he could have been imprisoned was 1848.

The date and circumstances of Su Renshan's death are mysterious. The passage in Xian Baogan's work, fixing the date of Su Renshan's visit to Liang Jiutu "in the years Daoguang/Xianfeng" could lead us to believe that Su Renshan

lived until the reign of Xianfeng (1851–1862). In fact, this vague affirmation seems to have been idly made and must not be taken very seriously. The *Su Clan Register*, quoted above, says “unfortunately, he enjoyed longevity no longer than Yan Hui” 惜壽享與顏子同. We know that this disciple of Confucius died when he was thirty-two. Obviously, it can not be taken literally. (The last dated painting by Su Renshan that we know was made when he was thirty-six.) Either the compiler of the register did not know the exact date of Su Renshan’s death or, which is not at all improbable from a village intellectual, he made a mistake about Yan Hui’s age. Or again, he may have introduced this historical allusion out of literary pedantry, simply wishing to convey that *Su Renshan died in the bloom of life*, not trying to draw an exact mathematical parallel between their ages. A certain Yi 易, a Shunde collector, claimed that there were no dated paintings by Su Renshan after 1847 and concluded that he died then, when he was thirty-four.<sup>88</sup> The famous painting in Jen You-wen’s collection (*Landscape imitated from Li Sixun*, dated 1849) now invalidates this. As far as we know, there are no paintings dated later than 1849. It is therefore generally supposed that Su Renshan died at the end of this year or early in 1850.<sup>89</sup>

Su Renshan was more and more affected by his old ‘convulsions’ (epilepsy?) and became more and more mentally disturbed (the long 1849 inscription is incoherent). He probably died in prison—at least, this is what Jen You-wen concludes, like many other authors.

However, we should mention two other traditional accounts of his death, confusing though they are. In his *Liu An Sui Bi* 留庵隨筆, Li Qilong 李啟隆, an author living in the last years of the Empire, writes: “He had a premonition that his end was near; having made his ablutions, he crouched down beside a well to meditate and died.”<sup>90</sup> Until recently, there were people in Shunde who pointed out the spot where he died.<sup>91</sup> According to a second account,<sup>92</sup> he “died in a ditch”: this would mean he had left prison, but unfortunately the information is desperately vague and obscure.

Chen Tier says he was buried at Maning Shan 馬寧山.<sup>93</sup> He adds that, a few years later, when his remains were transferred to their final burial place,<sup>94</sup> it was discovered that he had “an extra bone shaped like a beehive” in his chest. Liu Tao, a local scholar (already mentioned above: he heard first-hand a number of rumours about Su Renshan), compares this attribute with a distinctive feature of the saints of antiquity, who were supposed to have “an additional orifice”. So the cycle is complete—the rebel rejected by his relatives, the wayward man who is thrown into prison, the black sheep who, when he died, was not even permitted to have a name tablet in the ancestral shrine,<sup>95</sup> ended by entering legend, became holy and was canonised by the pedants of the district! He was abandoned by history but mythology fostered him. . .

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Having tried systematically to reassemble all the known facts about Su Renshan, we have now come to the end of his biography. It is perhaps only the sheer inadequacy of our epitaph that can make it in any way eloquent: what traces can genius leave on the memories of men, when it grows and develops in isolation

amidst the cross-currents of the conventions of its age? The acts and words that Su Renshan used to express his thoughts and passions, have all been swept away. In the final analysis the most certain fact we know of him, preserved by his contemporaries and by posterity from all the mass of confused, contradictory and suspect rumours of which he was the subject, is his strong liking for a sort of onion pickled in ginger. . .

### CHAPTER III

## THE ART OF SU RENSHAN

"The only art that counts, is that of which we can say that its author would have died of suffocation if he had not produced it."

Julien Green

Su Renshan's father, as we have mentioned above, was quite a competent amateur painter. This might have encouraged Su Renshan's precocious vocation to some extent but one should not exaggerate its importance. In traditional Chinese society, painting was to most educated people a fashionable pastime and the scholars quite naturally fell into the way of it simply because they used a brush every day for their calligraphy. At a lower level of routine execution, the technique of Chinese painting may be reduced to a repertory of stereotype forms and compositions and to an assortment of mechanical recipes, easy to grasp. The artistic activity of Su Renshan's father, and of his younger brother, is not therefore particularly significant.

Both Su Renshan's 'autobiography' and certain anecdotes about his childhood (see *supra*, Chap. 2) show he had remarkably precocious talent as a painter. It is obvious that for him, painting was much more than a well-bred form of amusement and it soon grew into an imperious all-excluding passion.

He had no master. Like many other scholar-painters, all he required was occasional guidance from older men in the fundamental procedure of using brush and ink and the rest he learnt alone, copying both old and contemporary models.

Copying has always been the principal method used in which to learn the art of Chinese painting. Su Renshan was no exception. What is important for us to determine are the exact models he had at hand and consulted.

A literal interpretation of the inscriptions on Su Renshan's paintings leads to the conclusion that he had a sound knowledge of the Classics. Among the models he claims to imitate are Tang masters (Li Sixun), Song masters (Li Cheng, Su Dongpo), Yuan masters (Ni Zan, Huang Gongwang, Wu Zhen, Wang Meng), and Ming masters (Shen Zhou, Wen Zhen-ming, Tang Yin). In actual fact, his knowledge of ancient paintings was largely theoretical and illusory.

During his childhood and adolescence, it is unlikely that in his home village, he could have seen anything other than paintings by local amateurs of the Qing period. Later, when he had acquired a certain reputation, he went to visit some of the local celebrities and saw their collections.<sup>1</sup> However, this could not have taught him much about the classical works: Cantonese collections have a rather singular nature and we might here discuss this in more detail.

In the first chapter, we pointed out the cultural backwardness of Guangdong; a peripheral province with relatively little historical background, it suffered in comparison with the major centres of China's artistic and literary life. In the field of painting, it was, practically speaking, only in the 18th century that its first large collections were built up.<sup>2</sup> These, acquired for reasons of prestige rather than

of taste, by collectors endowed more with money than knowledge, made a bizarre assortment of paintings. In their attempts to fill their collections with all the great names of Chinese art, they were almost inevitably condemned to collections of fakes. In China it was always recognized as difficult even for the most well-connected collector to obtain relatively old works. In the Tang period, critics knew only the names of some artists from the Six Dynasties; under the Song, works of many of the Tang masters were almost impossible to find; in the Ming period, the entire work of some of the Northern Song artists were thought to have completely disappeared; at the beginning of the Qing, the good Yuan paintings had become very rare. For testing the authenticity of a work, there was a problem common to all collectors, namely the lack of opportunity for making direct comparisons with old paintings, dispersed throughout the country, locked away in the enclaves of a vast number of private collections. Under these conditions, the Cantonese collectors had a poor start: they entered the game too late, were less well-informed than their northern competitors and moreover they were too far from the artistic hub, destined indeed to pick up the refuse. Some such collections still exist today in Hong Kong, and from an historical point of view, they deserve a special study. They provide a sort of imaginary museum of Chinese painting. The chief masters from the different periods are all there but represented by late and often crude imitations (thought, of course, to be originals).

These illusory panoramas are like those supplied by the printed plates of a handbook on painting. Handbooks became much in vogue from the end of the Ming period. Apart from a didactic text, which was like an analytical dictionary of forms, they often had a historical section which included reproductions of some of the works of illustrious masters of the past. The authors were usually talented artists themselves, but their choice of examples was often capricious or made for reasons of convenience, picked out at random among models which they found at hand. When copying out these chance models (which were often only more or less old copies themselves), certain distortions were inevitable; these were accentuated by the engraver who had to transpose the painting copied by the author of the handbook into a different medium. For the innumerable collectors of the provinces who did not have access to the masterpieces in the private collections, such handbooks were a criterion and the chief instruments through which they gained knowledge of old paintings. They built up a theoretical image of the characteristic style of each master from the reproductions, an image that was often far removed from the real style of these painters but on which a whole galaxy of imitators and forgers too, now based their work. The influence of these theoretical reconstructions of old paintings on the development of Chinese painting from the 17th century on, is a phenomenon that has not yet been sufficiently recognized. It was all the more determinant because the illustrated handbook circulated everywhere while the original masterpieces remained buried, known only to a restricted elite. In regions far from the historical centres of production, engravings were invested with an even greater authority and became the source of a new form of pictorial expression. This was true not only for a Su Renshan in Guangdong but equally so for the scholar-painters of the Nanga school (南畫) in Japan. The roots of Ikeno Taiga 池大雅's work (1723-1776), for example, can be found in these same xylographic

handbooks of the Qing, from which a century later Su Renshan himself drew inspiration. The striking analogy between Su Renshan's painting and that of Japanese painter-scholars<sup>3</sup> can be very simply explained by the similar influences to which they were exposed. Nourished at the same spring (the plates of *Jiyazhai Huapu* 集雅齋畫譜, of *Shizhuzhai Shuhuapu* 十竹齋書畫譜 and of *Jieziyuan Huazhuan* 芥子園畫傳), Japanese painter-scholars and provincial Chinese painters found themselves placed in the same position, with respect to the great Chinese pictorial tradition: their knowledge of this was incomplete, indirect and superficial. Their relative ignorance benefited them because, from the end of the 18th century, painters working in the old painting metropolises of China, who were in direct contact with the classical works, had become sterilised by the sheer weight of their own culture and derived a feeling of impotence and inferiority from contemplating the stupendous models of the past. They were reduced to frigid and timorous academics. Meanwhile, the great painter-scholars of Japan or Su Renshan in his province, hardly had anything better to study than clumsy local products (as far as traditional painting is concerned, we find exactly the same 'provincialism' in 18th century Japanese painting as in Guangdong painting of the same period) which could hardly have intimidated or inhibited their impulsive temperaments. At the same time, in the prints of their handbooks, they found the rudimentaries of a simplified technique and elements of an imaginary tradition, easy to imitate and improve. Even when they thought themselves well-informed on traditional procedures, they were in fact in a position to be much freer and more candid, and it was this which made it possible for them to be so audaciously creative. Compared with the 'metropolitan' artists, they were certainly less gifted in purely technical matters—awkwardness, clumsy brush strokes (what Chinese aesthetes call "bai bi" 敗筆—a faulty brush stroke, something equivalent to a note that is out of tune in music—and which, in the eyes of a conservative critic, is an unpardonable crime) are frequent among the Japanese scholars and not rare for Su Renshan. On the other hand, by their very ignorance, these artists were marvelously protected from the desiccating effect of critical discernment and 'taste'.

At the beginning, Su Renshan's work lay somewhere on an axis between two poles: traditional Cantonese painting and engravings from illustrated books.

Traditional Cantonese painting played little part in the later development of his personal style but provided the fundamentals for his early, basic technique. The paintings of his youth are executed in the style of Cantonese art and betray a strong influence of artists such as Gao Yan 高儼, Xie Lan-sheng 謝蘭生, and Li Jian 黎簡 (the latter was in fact born in Shunde and Su Renshan could easily have had opportunity to acquaint himself with his work). Su Renshan showed an astonishingly precocious mastery of this self-conscious, rather heavy, traditional provincial style: the *Landscape with buildings* (Cat. 317, Plate 2) painted when he was fifteen, shows that even when an adolescent there was little that the local elders could still teach him. Various dated paintings show that until he was at least twenty-four, his painting remained largely in line with current Cantonese fashions.

Engraving played a decisive role in the elaboration of his original style. At an early date, he became interested in the plastic possibilities of a painting reduced to

pure lines, where linear expression becomes a complete substitute for tone value usually given by a wash—as in the landscape made when he was fifteen (Cat. 2, Plate 1). It seems however that it was only when he was about twenty-seven, that he started systematically developing this type of research.<sup>4</sup> The remarkable *Landscape on a poem of Jia Dao* (Cat. 164, Plates 4, 5, 6), dated 1840, is the first work marking the flowering of this new style derived from engraving: with the exception of one mountain in the background, painted on a wash, the entire work is strictly linear. Tonal values are expressed *within* the line by alternating brush strokes in thick ink with others in pale ink. The same procedure, substituting lines for a wash, is beautifully used to modulate intensity in *The Travelers* (Cat. 249, Plate 42), a masterpiece that may well date from this same period.

For some time, his experiments based on the linear expression of engravings, were accompanied by paintings of the more traditional type. For instance, during the same year, 1846, he made, in June (on silk, with colours) a landscape of absolutely classical elegance (Cat. 16, Plate 21) and at the beginning of the Autumn, a monumental landscape in linear style (Cat. 17, Plate 23) where, reversing the traditional relationship, which made engraving a substitute for painting, he tries to simulate the effect of a burin with his brush. This latter formula eventually prevailed in his work, leading to such intricate and powerful masterpieces as the *Two monasteries* (Cat. 165, Plates 44–45) and the austere perfection of the 1849 album (Cat. 32–55, Plates 54–57).

We can identify some of the engravings which Su Renshan studied. In an inscription on an album leaf, he explicitly refers to the *Handbook of Calligraphy and Painting of the Studio of the Ten Bamboos* 十竹齋書畫譜.<sup>5</sup> For example, a certain detail in his painting of a bathing bird is directly borrowed from a print by Hu Zhengyan 胡正言 (Plates 70, 71). In his treatment of certain classical motifs he is evidently using models and methods described in *The Mustard Seed Garden* 芥子園畫傳 (Plates 72, 73). The engravings of Shangguan Zhou 上官周 are another source, more specific but no less certain; Su Renshan mentions using him as a model in the inscription of a painting.<sup>6</sup> Shangguan Zhou's work seems to have had a strong influence on Su Renshan's figure painting; the similarities between a portrait of Wang Wei by the former and a portrait of Lu Buwei by the latter, eloquently illustrates this (Plates 66, 67). Even Shangguan Zhou's treatment of certain natural details (for instance, the rock on which Lü Zhaolin is sitting) may have served as a prototype for the whole range of purely graphic means of expression, developed through the years by Su Renshan in his landscapes (Plates 68, 69).

Apart from these sources which can be identified with precision, there is a mass of illustrated books—novels, plays—which ever since the Ming period, had been fashionable among the bourgeoisie. Although the artistic and technical standard was generally very high the engravings in these books were not considered to be works of art by aesthetes and collectors (which also explains why so few, out of the enormous number of these books produced under the Ming and Qing, have survived to the present day). The traditional point of view was that engraving was artisans' work and therefore anonymous and inferior. Even though they were denied official recognition in scholarly circles, they had a considerable aesthetic influence,



due to the fact that they were so largely diffused: children in middle class families first became aware of art when leafing through such illustrated books. Su Renshan, who was an avid reader from a very early age, can have been no exception.

Engravings played a threefold part in promoting Su Renshan's development: an *educational* function, initiating him to the plastic world, a *liberating* function, helping him by means of the graphic discipline inherent in them, to shake off the heaviness of the Cantonese style of painting, on which, in his early days, he was so dependent and finally a *controlling* function, enabling him to hold his violent temperament in rein: some of his most wild and frenetic creations seem to have been contemporaneous with other paintings in his starkest linear style. It may have been fear that the equilibrium of his art could so easily crumble into deliquescence, that drove him periodically to exert the graphic discipline derived from engraving, imposing on himself this strict concentration. It was the marriage of these two contradictory elements, on the one hand the disintegrating forces that were working on his mind and on the other, the rigour of this strictly linear discipline, that yielded the most perfect of his paintings: the *Two Monasteries* (Plates 54-57) and the 1849 album leaves (Plates 44-47). Instead of being squandered in vehemence and anarchy, the violent impulsiveness of his genius was channeled into a powerful stream, which animates these almost classical pages with an intense inner tension.

In the space of a short career, Su Renshan made a vast number of paintings. A passage by Xian Baogan gives us some idea of the extent of his production. According to Xian, Su Renshan, after painting the Studio of the Twelve Rocks while staying with Liang Jiutu, used to say that "*of the more than a thousand paintings he had made in the course of his career*, this was the one with which he felt most satisfied".<sup>7</sup> If we agree that the sojourn in Liang Jiutu's mansion was around 1840, the "over a thousand paintings" were the product of only about four years' really intensive activity (according to the first 'autobiography' it was only in 1836, when Su Renshan had given up bothering about examinations, that he set to painting seriously). Nine other years followed these. Working on this assumption we might conclude that altogether, Su Renshan made at least three thousand paintings—and this is only a minimum. The number is not after all surprising. Although a large work made with painstaking care might take up several months of labour, paintings made in a freehand style could be run off at the rate of a dozen or so in two hours, once a painter felt moved by the fever of inspiration (or when he merely contented himself with repeating one of his well-tested recipes).

What remains of Su Renshan's work today can therefore only be about one tenth of the total. This proportion is also quite a probable one, if we take into account the disconcertingly negligent way the Chinese treat paintings,<sup>8</sup> the particularly unfavourable natural conditions for preserving paintings in Guangdong<sup>9</sup> and the fact that Su Renshan's reputation was not sufficiently high or else it was too tarnished with obloquy, to merit the solicitous care of a collector.

During his lifetime, as we mentioned above, Su Renshan's art did not pass unnoticed by the aesthetes and scholars of his prefecture. His ignominious end in prison, under the cloud of an accusation of filial impiety, must have cooled the interest of all decent men around him. How could an unworthy son

make good paintings? Even to the present day, there are critics who are unable to overcome this psychological barrier.<sup>10</sup>

At the end of the 19th century, there was however one scholar from Shunde, Su Ruohu (1856–1917), who took an interest in the life and work of Su Renshan. He made an inscription on one of Su Renshan's paintings, in which there is a lot of useful biographical information.<sup>11</sup>

In the very first years of the Republic, Su Renshan must still have had some ardent admirers among collectors. For example, Chen Tieer describes with elaborate detail the itinerary of three of Su Renshan's important paintings, two of which, *Figures with Phoenix* and *Figures with Dragons* are now in Jen You-wen's collection. These paintings were transmitted from father to son for three generations, in a particularly prosperous branch of the Su Clan. The last heir, Su Jianquan 蘇劍泉, who was president of the Chamber of Commerce of Yunnan—Guangdong—Guangxi, took these paintings to Canton. Here, several connoisseurs offered him large sums, but he refused to sell them. However, later on, they fell into the hands of a doctor (a specialist of venereal diseases, as the good Chen specifies, never omitting a single detail), a certain Yang Yaochi 楊耀池, who was also from Shunde (Su Renshan was decidedly a prophet only for men of his own country). Chen's tale ends here, but thanks to Jen You-wen we can finish the story. Jen acquired the two masterpieces mentioned above (the third seems to have disappeared without trace) for a song; they had been forgotten by a distraught client in a cheap restaurant in Canton.

The descending curve of this itinerary is very significant. For the few items that have been miraculously recovered, how many more have been lost, buried by ignorance, indifference or neglect?

If some part of Su Renshan's work has survived, it is largely thanks to a foreigner, a Japanese diplomat, Suma Yakichiro 須磨彌吉郎. For this at least, the Chinese may be grateful to Suma, although otherwise, owing to his political activity in Nanking on the eve of the Japanese invasion, he is less worthy of sympathy—that however is another story. In the 1920's, Suma, who was the Japanese consul in Canton, discovered some of Su Renshan's paintings by chance. It was love at first sight. (The enthusiasm of a Japanese amateur for this art, that had left the Chinese connoisseurs relatively indifferent, is not really so astonishing. Knowing the Nanga masters, his sensibilities must have been naturally susceptible to this type of painting, while at the same time he was less biased by the preconceived ideas and prejudices which, although they make for the highest subtlety of Chinese taste, also confine it in the most cramping manner.) He at once started buying all the pictures he could find; at the time, Su Renshan's paintings were sold on the market at a derisory price. It was therefore easy for this diplomat, who can not have been hard up or miserly, to buy Su Renshan's by the bundle. Soon, all the art dealers and swindlers of Canton heard of his unusual infatuation and they profited from it—his passion showed more fervour than discrimination—not hesitating to fill in the gaps on the market by conjuring up a few extra Su Renshans. Thus, Suma soon found himself master of an impressive number of paintings—because of a few superior ones, an impressive collection—but he was also encumbered with a host of dubious pieces and a few downright fakes.

Suma's action favoured the fortunes of Su Renshan's work. This sudden interest shown by a foreign diplomat for an obscure painter from their province, awoke the attention and later the emulation of a certain number of Cantonese scholars. In the foremost rank was Jen You-wen, a prominent figure in the world of politics and culture, who also started systematically to collect Su Renshan's paintings. Later, he made use of much of his knowledge, his social prestige and personal fortune, elucidating the history and culture of Guangdong province and making it better known.<sup>12</sup> Although he set about collecting Su Renshans later than Suma, he had even greater success. In a country where personal connections and clan and territorial relationships are so important, Jen had an advantage over his rival, in being of the region. Strictly speaking, he was not himself a connoisseur of painting (by vocation, he is more of a historian) but he could count on the effective collaboration of a whole network of 'clients', friends, dealers and discriminating amateurs, to help him in his research. He started making his acquisitions in the 1930's in Canton and continued in Hong Kong until about 1950. The collection he thus built up is not only numerically the most important but also the best in quality—there are only a few dubious paintings or forgeries.

The first time a comprehensive collection of Su Renshan's work was shown to the general public was in 1940, in Hong Kong, in an exhibition of cultural objects from Guangdong, "Guangdong Wenwu" (廣東文物). This exhibition, in the halls of the Feng Pingshan Museum, drew a huge crowd and lasted for five days (22–26th February). It contained a vast number of paintings, calligraphies and archive documents relevant to the history of Guangdong and included several paintings by Su Renshan, from Jen You-wen's collection. Mr. Jen had moreover been the prime mover on the organising committee of this project. For most of the critics, the paintings by Su Renshan, who until this time was known scarcely at all or only in a fragmentary way, were a revelation. The exhibition was followed by the publication of a large work (廣東文物, 3 vols., Hong Kong 1941) aimed at perpetuating and developing the theme. This work, the fruit of collaboration by a number of historians, philologists, artists and critics, despite the rather unequal and composite standard of its content, remains one of the most useful introductions to Guangdong's cultural history, presented here under the most diverse aspects. Painting is given much attention and Su Renshan in particular is the object of several analyses.

This first rediscovery of Su Renshan simultaneously gave rise to a series of articles in the Chinese press in Hong Kong and brought to light various fragments of biographical information, at a time when it was still possible to collect stories current in the region of his birthplace.

Eight years later (28 May 1948), there was an exhibition dedicated entirely to Su Renshan in the Centre of Cantonese Culture 廣東文獻館 in Canton. This very important exhibition, organised by the Committee for the Cultural Treasures of Guangdong, included 120 paintings, all from Jen You-wen's collection. This revelation, even more spectacular and complete than the first, gave rise to a new series of articles and biographical and critical studies on Su Renshan, in various newspapers and journals in Canton and Hong Kong.

Further, a certain number of Cantonese aesthetes and collectors started to collect Su Renshan's work: Li Fanfu 李凡夫, Huang Miaozi 黃苗子, Lee Kwok-wing 李國榮, Huang Banruo 黃般若.

This increasing interest in Su Renshan was nevertheless limited to a restricted circle of connoisseurs. As for the general public, its interest was stirred each time only to be blighted by political upheavals which followed both of the exhibitions: after the first, the Japanese occupation and the establishment of People's China's new regime, after the second.

Since the Liberation, practically nothing has been done in China to spread knowledge of Su Renshan. This is due less to prejudice than ignorance; the fact that most of Su Renshan's work and most of the connoisseurs of his art have left China, while the few who remained soon found themselves absorbed in other tasks, is chiefly to blame. We know, for example, that in 1948 on the eve of the Liberation, Huang Miaozi in Shanghai was ready to publish a collection of all the Su Renshan paintings he had in his possession.<sup>13</sup> The book has still not come into print and we do not know what has now become of Huang Miaozi's collection. After the Liberation, Huang himself remained very active, and to him we owe a series of critical editions on classical treatises on painting.

For the rest, two paintings by Su Renshan appeared in a big exhibition on the theme "The last hundred years of Chinese painting"<sup>14</sup> in 1958 in Peking. The Museum of Canton possesses a certain number. These consist mainly of paintings given by Li Fanfu, five of which were reproduced in the luxurious volume on Cantonese painting.<sup>15</sup> A sixth was reproduced in a packet of postcards of paintings from the museum of Canton, published in Peking in 1965.<sup>16</sup> In 1959, some left-wing people in Hong Kong organised an exhibition of Cantonese paintings, chosen from various local collections. This exhibition included two Su Renshans (one of which, an important landscape, used to belong to Li Fanfu) which are reproduced in the Catalogue.<sup>17</sup> In 1961, under the patronage of People's China, the Chinese Chamber of Commerce of Hong Kong exhibited here a selection of works of art from the Museum of Canton. There were six Su Renshans in this exhibition.<sup>18</sup>

As we see, the efforts made by People's China to make known the work of Su Renshan, add up to very little. This negligence seems more regrettable and surprising in this particular case, when for once, it would have been possible to present a painter from the old regime as a rebel, without the distortion of historical truth.

The exhibition in the City Hall of Hong Kong in August–September 1966, was a new and important landmark in the history of Su Renshan's art; sixty-five of his paintings were exhibited at the time and Lee Kwok-wing's monograph was also published.

Finally, Jen You-wen's study (in press at the time of writing) which, we hope, will be followed by an exhibition of about one hundred items from his collection, should manage to reinstate Su Renshan in the position he deserves.

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Now that the "rediscovery" of Su Renshan<sup>19</sup> is at last assured, it is time to essay a first critical analysis of his work.

Contemporary critics, in so far as they knew anything at all of his work,<sup>20</sup> were none too kind to Su Renshan and their reservations are not always without justification. We might equally well say that the fervour of some of his admirers springs from roots quite foreign to art, from provincial chauvinism or commercial speculation.

To vaunt his work according to the precepts of traditional aesthetics, as some of his indiscriminating admirers have tried to do, is contradictory: it is to expose the one vulnerable flank to the critics while blinding oneself to that which gives it original value and meaning.

From the classical Chinese standpoint, the object of painting does not lie in constructing and inventing plastic forms; these are the means through which one attains the end, a state of 'consonance' or 'harmonious unity' (氣韻) with the spirit of universal creation. This 'consonance' alone justifies the existence of art and gives it value. As long as this quality is in operation, it is of little importance whether the forms used are original or not. Thus, a Chinese painter copying a picture by a predecessor, does not feel his occupation is inferior to that of the creator of an original work. The ultimate value of his painting is determined by his aptitude for animating the forms with the influx and rhythm of cosmic energy. This aptitude itself is not a function of the formal pattern followed or of the composition (these may either be fixed stereotypes or borrowed arrangements) but a question of the artist's use of brush and ink. It is this that is unique to the author. The way the subject is expressed is the specific and inimitable projection of the forces from his *heart* (moral personality, spiritual character and intellectual culture) governing the *hand* (dexterity, technical discipline).

For the Chinese critic, contrary to his western counterpart, the pre-requisite of *originality* (i.e. invention of forms) is considerably reduced and only secondary. A more subtle pre-requisite of *expression* takes its place and a work of art is judged because of the way it has been interpreted not because of its innate creativeness (to make an analogy in music, the Chinese painter resembles the performer rather than the composer). This conception of the all-importance of execution and interpretation in art, is even better illustrated in calligraphy. Here, there is no question of creating forms; the forms used, the characters of writing, are a universal and invariable datum. Not only is the graphic structure of each character predetermined but the sequence in which their component elements are built up cannot be varied at the whim of a brush either. Calligraphy expresses personality and sensibility only through the manner in which the given form is interpreted, the capacity shown by the author for animating it with life and rhythm. Of course in painting, the part played by interpretation is less obvious than in calligraphy because, after all, there are innumerable ways of 'writing' the shape of a stone while there is only one way (within the bounds of the style of calligraphy which has been selected) of writing the ideograph 'stone'. This theoretical liberty of painting is considerably reduced in practice, because in time Chinese painting came to define its own 'writing' in a strict and limited manner. To paint a stone, an artist is virtually reduced to ploughing through a catalogue of forms, where there is an inventory of the various graphic formulas that have become accepted through use (in this

particular example of the stone, the painter would have to choose among the various types of 'wrinkles' 皴).

In the light of these very summary facts about the aesthetics of Chinese painting,<sup>21</sup> we can understand better why Su Renshan's work offended or disappointed classical connoisseurs.

Let us take a typical painting like the *Torrent* for example (Cat. 103, Plate 39), one that makes a particularly vivid impression on western critics. Submitting it to the opinion of several Chinese aesthetes, I have noticed a unanimous reticence in their reactions. These unfavourable judgements should not be dismissed briefly, under the pretext that they were made by pedantic academics; on the contrary, they were made by sensitive men, well-informed in the aesthetic standards of a given system and they can help us better to understand the nature of this system, while at the same time showing the extent to which Su Renshan succeeded in extracting himself from it and overcoming it.

In this particular painting, what immediately strikes the conservative critic, is the 'absence of ink' (無墨) and a certain clumsiness in the use of the brush, both culpable defects showing an incurable lack of 'consonance', without which the painting can hardly be called a painting. Normally, the dialectic of the Yin and Yang, embodied in the forms by the dialogue of Water and Mountain, should be made manifest at the instrumental level in the harmonious balance of Ink (tone values and wash) with Brush (graphic structure). Here, the "absence of ink" signifies that the author renounced the liquid element—the wash—letting the entire work rely on the architecture built by the brush.

As for the brush work itself, according to the precepts of calligraphy, it is here flagrantly wanting. Not only is the inscription, (in large characters at the bottom of the painting) of poor workmanship but the framework of the painting is uniformly lacking in 'elasticity' (起伏). The lack of maturity Su Renshan here shows in his brushwork is in fact normal and inevitable. However gifted a painter or calligrapher, mastery of the brush required such long apprenticeship and such intensive practice that it is rare for an artist to achieve complete competence before he is fifty or even sixty years old. Often, a painter or calligrapher starts producing his really important work only after he is seventy. Of Su Renshan, who died when he was thirty-six, we can say that he produced all his creative work during a few years of youth, which for other painters was an obscure stage of their apprenticeship.

Seen from another angle, critics pointing out these failings of Su Renshan's are no more pertinent than the academics who reproached Cezanne with faulty drawing. Within the framework of their own system, these academics were not wrong. What they did not take into account was that in this particular instance, their criteria had ceased to operate, because Cezanne's intention was to extract himself from this system and to construct a new spatial world beyond it. In its own way, Su Renshan's enterprise was no less radical and only premature death prevented him from carrying it to its ultimate conclusion. The substitution of traditional 'wrinkles' and wash by a hard use of graphic techniques, the single stroke and pure line (a substitution already carried out in engraving but which was there made for imperative technical reasons: the necessity for translating forms created by a brush

into forms that could be made with a burin) was for Su Renshan an aesthetic commitment, carrying truly revolutionary implications. Reversing the traditional relationship which made engraving a humble substitute for painting and trying to simulate the effect of a burin with his brush, Su Renshan subjected the sacred function of the brush to an almost sacrilegious distortion.<sup>22</sup> Relieved of its mystical virtue of 'resonance' and its privileged role as interpreter of the cosmic spirit, the brush found itself in a way 'secularised'. In a work like *The Torrent*, the painting is no longer a method of communicating with the world, it has become an aim in itself, a graphic construction, a formal invention, a plastic creation. And this is where Su Renshan's merit and genius lie. He is the only 'modern' painter in 19th century China, a painter whose modernity is so daring that the greatest Chinese artists of the 20th century, certain of whom had indeed a superior technique, seem retrograde compared with him. Of course, we are not concerned here with opposing qualitatively the modern, western conception of painting—and Su Renshan seems to have come intuitively very close to this—with the traditional conception elaborated in the classical Chinese civilisation. All we would like to stress is the exceptional accomplishment of an artist who seems to have been able to overcome principles which his culture, environment and period imposed on him, to create work on which traditional criteria had no bearing. Less skilful perhaps than many artists better trained and better informed than he was, this 'primitive painter of a new art' would not have known what to do with their skill. Beside his radical originality, the false originality of all the 'eccentrics' and 'fantastics', from Wu Bin to the Eccentrics of Yangzhou, was shown up at its true worth. Their motive was not one of renewal but the reaffirmation of an inability to question the past—pure mannerism whose effete triviality, as with that of all mannerisms, was enclosed within the traditional system and dependent on it.

We can now better understand the paradox: that the amateurs of art whose susceptibilities are less impinged with the pictorial orthodoxy of Chinese art, can more easily appreciate Su Renshan's type of painting. In this new perspective, the final dictum of the classical critic loses force: the constant reproach that Su Renshan's work fundamentally lacks the quality 'hanxu' 含蓄 (the art of suggestion, of implication, the less stated, the more told, a cardinal virtue of Chinese aesthetics: "the idea must be fully expressed without the brush completing its work" 意到筆不到). In Su Renshan's painting, everything is stated most explicitly. For him the 'idea' of a painting beyond the form, had ceased to exist; the form was no longer supposed to suggest a mystical experience, it had become the place and the matter of a pictorial experience.

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Su Renshan had no spiritual posterity. His too brief destiny, slipping away in provincial obscurity and ending in ignominy, allowed him no opportunity of inspiring disciples. The isolation and the lack of understanding surrounding him during his lifetime, despite a local success aroused by idle curiosity, continued to obscure his work after his death. Apart from anything else, historical circumstances did not favour his art. Soon after his disappearance, the whole of South China became the arena of the Taiping rebellion. Compared with this vast crisis, a prelude

to yet more profound upheavals, what testimony could a few abandoned paintings carry, in the negligent hands of ignorant heirs?

The first half of the 20th century, even more productive of national tragedies, was no more propitious to a calm reevaluation of his work. The paintings that remained gradually became regrouped, in the hands of a few collectors—fortunately for their survival but making it yet more likely that they would be kept from public recognition. Suma has never exhibited his Su Renshan's publicly in Japan, where his ownership of them is not even known. His reputation as a collector is based entirely on his remarkable collection of Qi Baishi and other modern Chinese painters (not to mention his ridiculous Spanish bric-a-brac!).<sup>23</sup> The first Su Renshan's from Jen You-wen's collection that were shown, in the exhibition of Cantonese culture in Hong-Kong in 1940, attracted the attention of a large number of connoisseurs. However, the mounting Japanese aggression, followed by the occupation of Hong Kong, soon gave them other things to worry about. The 1948 exhibition dedicated to Su Renshan in Canton, where 120 of his paintings, from Jen You-wen's collection, were shown, only lasted a day. At that moment, China was on the eve of a change in regime. Huang Miaozi in Shanghai was ready to publish a collection of reproductions of Su Renshan's paintings; the Liberation interrupted this project. The Jen collection was transported to Hong Kong shortly before the Communists entered Canton; to facilitate transportation and reduce their volume, most of the paintings had the lower part of their mounting amputated and in this unpresentable condition, they have mouldered away here in the insalubrious confines of two old trunks that have not been opened for the past twenty years, except for the occasional visitor. The exhibition of the specimens from the collections of Lee Kwok-wing and Robert E. Tow, in the Museum of Hong Kong City Hall in 1965, happily came to reawaken public interest. However, this exhibition contained only a small number of paintings, and although some were masterpieces, some were of dubious authenticity.

There have always been a few critics and artists who ardently defended Su Renshan. However, historical circumstances and the hopelessness of building up a relatively complete picture of his work, made it impossible for any of them to convert this enthusiasm into systematic knowledge.

Among painters, I can find only one man who has to some extent been able to echo Su Renshan's work. This is Zheng Chang 鄭萇. This Cantonese painter, whose very name is almost totally forgotten today and only one or two of whose paintings survive, was a sympathiser of Sun Yat-sen. Fleeing from the persecutions of the Manchu authorities, he came to Hong Kong as a refugee and died here in the first years of the Republic, after a period of several years of precarious, drunken and bohemian living. When so many trashy local artists acquire such disproportionately high reputations, ignoring the work of this attractive and personal painter seems even more unjust. To be persuaded of his merit, one has only to look at the *Landscape* in Lee Kwok-wing's collection (Plate 77). Su Renshan's influence is evident but it is not parodied. His art is here reinterpreted in a sensitive and original light; perhaps the painting is more superficial and less vigorous—the nervous and delicate lines hardly seem to touch the paper and are far from possessing Su Renshan's decisive strength but they are nevertheless clever and subtle.



Apparently Zheng Chang made some fake Su Renshans (another Hong Kong artist, He Jianshi 何劍士, also specialised in this). He must have been regrettably well equipped for the task and the *Landscape* reproduced here can serve as a useful caution when judging the authenticity of Su Renshans.

No monograph on a Chinese painter could be complete without a section devoted to forgeries. For the great artists, it very often happens that the number of forgeries (even counting only the better ones) largely exceeds the number of authentic works and in some cases, the ivy ends up hiding the tree that sustains it.<sup>24</sup> Su Renshan's relative obscurity protected him to a large extent, yet even so (as we shall see further on in the Catalogue) the proportion of dubious paintings and of obvious forgeries is not negligible. Generally speaking, the forgeries are of recent manufacture; most of them were probably made in the first two or three decades of this century. While many of the authentic paintings are in a lamentable state (in Guangdong, paintings deteriorate more quickly than elsewhere, because of the extremely humid climate and the insects; in the case of Su Renshan we might add to these natural factors, the indifference and negligence of man) the forgeries, made at a later date, are better preserved because they only appeared when interest in Su Renshan had increased.

At first, it might seem surprising that work as little known as Su Renshan's should have excited the interest of the forgers. In actual fact, for the very reason that he was little known as a painter and because his paintings were relatively recent, the enterprise was tempting. The intellectual and material investment required for successful forgery were more modest: it was hardly necessary, as it is to manufacture fake antiques, to have erudite knowledge of the history and the materials (silk, paper, ink) used at the period. The problems also of artificial patina, of the mounting, the addition of seals belonging to and inscriptions made by previous collectors, did not arise here. For any relatively competent painter, faking a Su Renshan would hardly have cost him more effort than to make a painting of his own. Needless to say, the results were proportionate to the facility. If the crudity of these forgeries today seems striking, it is because we now have a wide range of reference and have learnt, from studying authentic Su Renshans, to recognize more accurately the characteristic features of his art. The amateur of thirty or fifty years ago had no such criteria on which to base his judgement. Few of them had more than a vague idea of what Su Renshan's painting was like, so that it was particularly subject to abuse from the crudest counterfeiters. This is especially true of the Suma collection where there are, beside the one or two gems, some of the most absurd forgeries (including, among others, a Su Renshan dated . . . 1865!). We should not throw stones at Suma. He was both discoverer and pioneer and it was to be expected that, advancing across unknown territory, his first endeavours were experimental and fumbling. Moreover at the time he bought his collection, both originals and fakes were sold for such ridiculously small sums that, with the financial means he, as a foreign diplomat, had at his disposal, he did not risk losing much by buying in bulk all that the dealers brought him. Although the sums he paid were so derisory, they nevertheless meant for the forgers a few good meals and some jugs of wine and as this type of work cost them little more than the price of a sheet of paper and an hour of leisure, it was worth it.

The appearance of the first wave of forgeries seems to have been precipitated by Suma's interest. On the whole, as we have just mentioned, these were very crude. In Suma's wake, little by little, various Cantonese collectors started searching out and assembling Su Renshan's paintings. This led to a keener demand but also to a sharp rise in the general standard.

Fake Su Renshans can be classified into several categories:

1. Commonplace, anonymous, Cantonese paintings, generally of bad quality and bearing no stylistic relation with Su Renshan's work, on which an inscription, a signature and a seal of Su Renshan's was added. (Examples: see Cat. 56, 57, 215, 216, 217, 323 etc. etc. See also Plate 84). This is obviously the least interesting and the most crude variety.

2. Improvisations 'in the style' of Su Renshan (or in what the forger thought was Su Renshan's style). The forger works from memory, in a freehand and approximate way, without having a precise model in front of him. These mainly consist of figure paintings. (The fact that Su Renshan was *also* a landscape painter was hardly known. This latter aspect of his work, perhaps the most remarkable, is still largely unknown to the public; there are also fewer forgeries among his landscapes.) The forger laid even greater emphasis on the rawness and the rough violent character that was thought to be typical of Su Renshan, attempting in this way to conceal the hesitancy of his own brush. This phenomenon of *exaggeration* is generally characteristic of all forgeries, which try to be more typical than the originals themselves; the forger retains only a few of the master's specific easily recognizable singularities, which he unfeelingly emphasizes. It is such fakes as these that have done most damage to Su Renshan's reputation, making him pass for an artist incapable of balance and subtlety. (Examples: see Cat. 62, 264, 288, 328, 332 etc. etc.)

3. Faithful copies: the forger tries to reproduce a model he has before his eyes, without modifying it in any way. This type of forgery is not without value; sometimes they can tell us something about the composition of an original that has been lost and they also preserve the content of certain inscriptions. It requires a really competent forger. For some specimens, we now have both the original and the copy. It is only from the quality of the workmanship that we can distinguish between them. But sometimes the outcome is not conclusive and then we are faced with the problem of duplicates.

4. The problem of duplicates: there are a few Su Renshans that exist in duplicate. There are three possible explanations:

A. Both are authentic. It sometimes happens that a painter, particularly well-satisfied with one of his compositions amuses himself repeating it several times (this is especially common in Chinese paintings). Plate 103-104 are a pair that could belong to this category.

B. At least one of the two is definitely a forgery. See, for example, Plates 105-106. Su Renshan may well have been capable of painting identical fans for two different people, but it is inconceivable that he would have painted two

identical fans *for the same person*. The workmanship on the two seems to be the same (rather indifferent at that) and it is impossible to distinguish between them on grounds of authenticity.

C. They are both forgeries, both equally second-rate (see Plates 95–96, 97–98). In this case, it is possible that a series of reproductions was made from an original that has been lost (see also Category 5, below).

5. ‘Industrialised forgeries’: a particularly detestable category because it shows entire lack of spirit. The forger reproduces *in series* one specimen or a group of them (a whole sequence of album leaves), x copies being made of each (see Plates 80–83, 85–90). To increase the yield, the forger, with a simple, semi-automatic sleight-of-hand, reduced the original to a stiff and rigid formula, that lent itself easily to rapid reproduction. The formula left room for certain mechanical variants, like symmetrical inversion of the composition (Plates 92–94) or the insertion, in a more complex composition, of some borrowed elements (Plate 90). In some instances, disjointed elements from a single original give rise to several different forgeries. (Plate 91 shows a probably authentic specimen, several elements of which have been borrowed to create forgeries, reproduced in Plates 92, 93, 94).

Seals are of dubious avail to solve the problem of forgeries. Su Renshan did not always append a seal to his paintings. Because a painting with no seal had much less value, dealers were often tempted to add a forged one to an authentic painting. Therefore, *the presence of a fake seal is not alone sufficient to disqualify a Su Renshan from being genuine*. Furthermore, the fact that a Su Renshan lacks a seal (which applies to no small number of his masterpieces) should inspire confidence. We might finally mention one particular seal (a round seal, “white”, marked 書畫禪) which is the veritable trademark of one forger’s workshop. As far as I know, *it is not found on a single authentic painting but it is on all specimens of the family of ‘industrialised forgeries’*.

*Pierre Ryckmans*

THE LIFE AND WORK OF  
SU RENSHAN

REBEL, PAINTER & MADMAN

1814-1849?

BOOK II

Translated from the French  
by  
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## NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

(1) The original edition of this work appeared in 1930. The absence of all reference to Su Renshan was not due simply to inadvertance, it was most certainly a deliberate omission: He Juefu (何覺夫: [畫人蘇仁山] in 大風半月刊, no. 75, Hong Kong, 20.9.1940) reports that he several times insisted to Wang Zhaoyong that the latter insert a note on Su Renshan but Wang always refused. I have since discussed this matter with He Juefu. According to him, Wang adopted a hostile attitude towards Su Renshan because the artist had been accused of filial 'impiety'. He refused to include him in the Catalogue because he thought he was bad company for the other artists. I met with a similar reaction from a certain member of the Shunde Su clan, who is now in Hong Kong. He was surprised by my interest in Su Renshan, even thought it rather unseemly. Li Tianma (李天馬: 廣東畫家蘇仁山, cutting from a daily newspaper of People's China but unfortunately both the title and the date are unknown) puts forward the hypothesis that it was perhaps Su Renshan's anti-Manchu attitude which made him anathema to Wang Zhaoyong, who was a Qing irredendist 清遺老. Li explains the surprising brevity of the passage devoted to Su Renshan by Xian Baogan 冼寶幹 in his 佛山忠義鄉志 (1923), in the same manner (in fact even if this passage is rather brief and superficial, it is far from being hostile). I do not think it necessary to search for a political explanation to account for this silence, or half-silence, of the conservative scholars: the non-conformity shown by Su Renshan both in his life and his art were enough to alienate him from all conventional souls.

Later, when Su Renshan's importance was accepted, thanks to the devoted interest of a few eminent collectors, it was no longer possible for Wang to exclude Su Renshan from the Catalogue he wished to be exhaustive. He therefore prepared a short memoir about him and this was included, with 150 others in a supplement to the posthumous re-edition (Hong Kong 1961). This note on Su Renshan consists of about three lines and erroneously attributes to him the courtesy name of his younger brother.

We might note that the local annals of the prefecture in which Su Renshan was born, say nothing of him. The register of his clan only gives him a brief mention of imprecise content, which should be treated cautiously. This conspiracy of silence from sources which normally provide the basic documentary facts of a man's life, makes the study of Su Renshan's biography a particularly difficult task. As we will see in the following chapter, there is hardly an element in his biography which is not veiled in uncertainty or which is not the object of contradictory rumours. There is indeed a real "Su Renshan mystery", whose cause we will try later to elucidate.

(2) Despite the plethora of publications on Chinese painting that have recently appeared, we have hardly advanced one iota in our scientific and objective knowledge of this art. Instead of undertaking a critical examination of the works of art, we continue to circle round, our heads in a literary-aesthetic cloud. There is no simple systematic monograph either in Chinese or occidental scholarship of even the most famous master, which includes a critical catalogue of his paintings. Among the

illustrations in recent books on art by highly reputable authors, in famous museums, in the most illustrious collections, in exhibitions organized under the auspices of learned institutions, we still come up against the ostensible and frequent presence of dubious pieces, even notorious fakes, tolerated for a thousand obscure reasons, often diplomatic or commercial: anything but an objective aesthetic appraisal. Like the soothsayers of ancient Rome, the experts can not look at each other without smiling into their beards but not one of them dares to open a frank, public discussion of such problems, for fear of treading on someone's corns. In the meantime, the study of Chinese painting remains, even at the most elementary level of the identification of standard works of art by the principal masters, a vague realm where, in the absence of universally accepted landmarks, each man follows his nose, treading paths that have scarcely been mapped out.

(3) Since the Yuan period, the 'painting of the literati', i.e. of the social elite who were amateur painters, has been officially thought of as the main, if not the exclusive, path to pictorial creation. The fundamental axiom of classical theories of painting, according to which "the quality of the painting is a function of the quality (spiritual or moral) of the man" has often been interpreted in a snobbish aristocratic connotation: the painting of quality is the one produced by a man of quality. Owing to this awareness of the flattery due to rank, Chinese critics have given considerable space to distinguished men who prided themselves on sometimes toying with the brush. The book by Wang Zhaoyong cited above is an extreme example of this type: it is more a form of historical Gotha of the mandarin and landowning nobility of the province of Guangdong, than a repertory of painters.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER I

(1) Let us recall the famous episode in Huineng's life: Huineng was of humble origin and was at first an uncouth and illiterate man. He sought out the Fifth Patriarch, Hongren, and requested to become his disciple. Hongren asked him: "Where do you come from and what do you want?" Huineng replied: "Your disciple was born in Xinzhou in Guangdong and came from afar to beg for your instruction. My one desire is to become a Buddha." Hongren retorted: "You are a Cantonese, you're a savage! How can you seek to become a Buddha? . . ." The master enjoined him to silence and for eight months assigned to him the exclusive tasks of chopping wood and threshing grain. After some time, Hongren decided to choose one of his disciples as his successor. To test their appreciation of doctrine, he asked each one to compose a poem expressing the degree of understanding he had attained. One of the most brilliant disciples, Shenxiu, wrote the following poem:

*"My body is the tree of Wisdom,  
My heart is like a dazzling mirror  
Which I unceasingly polish and repolish,  
So that dust will not tarnish it."*

The master praised this poem although he felt the level of attainment was insufficient, whereupon, to everyone's astonishment, Huineng interrupted his domestic chores to propose the following poem:

*"Wisdom has no tree,  
The dazzling mirror has no resting place;  
Nothing has ever existed,  
So where could dust settle?"*

Hongren then realised the worth of Huineng and chose him as his successor (see 六祖法寶壇經, Chap. I 行由). The blunt and paradoxical character of the Sixth Patriarch and the non-conformism and the insolent humour often found in Chan Buddhism, seem to have fascinated Su Renshan. This explains why many of his paintings bear a seal with a whimsical and enigmatic inscription, "the Seventh Patriarch Renshan" 七祖仁山, as if he wanted to pose as Huineng's spiritual heir.

(2) This stubborn type of conservatism is still met with in Hong Kong and not only among the lower classes but also among the bourgeoisie of the business and industrial world and even among University people. Various traditions (birth, wedding and funeral rites, feast-day observances, customs), often very primitive and feudal, are preserved and arouse ironic and sometimes scandalised wonder in Chinese from other provinces.

(3) Even today, under a regime as strongly centralised and disciplined as People's China, Guangdong is still a turbulent region and has an atmosphere all of its own. The presence of cadres foreign to the region has often been a source of friction. Just as in the Qing period, the proximity to Canton of the cosmopolitan centres of Hong Kong and Macao, makes a breach in Chinese isolationism. Echoes from the



outer world, transmitted to Guangdong by the thousands of Chinese who visit there each year from Hong Kong and Macao, are often subversive merely because they supply information censored by official sources (e.g. the recent news of the conquest of the moon, not yet current in the rest of the country, is widely known in Canton).

(4) The mere mention of a 'Cantonese culture' 廣東 or 嶺南文化 brings a smile to the lips of Chinese from other provinces. No one refers to 'Hunanese culture' or to 'the culture of Jiangsu' and that the Cantonese ever coined the term is symptomatic. Is it necessary to point out that a 'Cantonese culture' as such does not exist and that what is meant by this term, used here for convenience, is simply the local variations in Guangdong of Chinese culture?

(5) Wen Runeng 溫汝能, introduction to *Yuedong Wen Hai* [粵東文海], 序: 粵東瀕大海。宅南離。山禽水物。奇花異果。如離支。珊瑚。玳瑁之屬。莫不秉炎精。發奇采。(cited by Lo Xianglin 羅香林: 中國文化論叢 Hong Kong, 1967 p. 49). Wen Juneng (biographical note in 嶺南畫徵略 supplement 續錄 p. 10) belonged to one of the most distinguished families of Shunde 順德, the prefecture in which Su Renshan was born. Later, there will be occasion to comment on Su Renshan's relations with one of the members of this clan.

(6) The complete proverb is: "Young people should not set foot in Guangdong, nor old people in Sichuan" 少不入粵老不入川. The road to Sichuan was so bad that it was unlikely an old man would ever manage to make the return journey. Jen You-wen, a Cantonese, tried to construe the first phrase in a way that made it seem less offensive. According to him, it was merely a warning against tropical diseases current in Guangdong, which young people, in the carelessness of their years, were more likely to contract (see 簡又文: [廣東文化之研究] in 廣東文物 Hong Kong 1941, Vol. III, p. 653). Literary sources make it easy to refute this prim interpretation; the perils mentioned, that menace young people in Guangdong, most certainly came from courtesans, not mosquitoes. Shen Fu, for example, quotes the proverb and suggests this meaning, at the end of the 18th century. He gives a vivid description of Canton's pleasure quarter in his famous autobiography (浮生六記) where, incidentally, he often betrays the naïve astonishment of a visitor discovering for the first time the exotic world of Guangdong. (I have made a French translation of this work: Shen Fu, *Six Recits au fil inconstant des jours*, Brussels, 1966. For English version, see Lin Yu-t'ang's translation: *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*, in T'ien Hsia Monthly, Hong Kong, 1935. This translation was reprinted in *The Wisdom of China*, by the same author but in an abridged form.

(7) The Cantonese, on their side, have great difficulty pronouncing 'mandarin' Chinese in an intelligible way. Mandarin is spoken all across China with different accents but Cantonese mandarin seems to fall particularly heavily on the ears of the northern Chinese—whence the saying "I fear neither Heaven nor Earth, I only fear having to listen to a Cantonese speaking mandarin" 天不怕, 地不怕, 只怕廣東人說官話. Nasty wisecracks like this obviously make the Cantonese even more reluctant to speak the national language and encourages them to turn in on themselves.

(8) Quick though they are to respond to a revolutionary movement, the leader must be from their province. A leader foreign to Guangdong would be unlikely to find an audience. Even the Communists have had to comply with this oversensitive regionalism. For example, in Hong Kong, in leftwing schools and during official celebrations of the Party, the Cantonese dialect is used almost exclusively because the officials fear that favouring the national language would alienate the local masses.

(9) A typical example recently, of this attitude, is the publication of *Anthology of Famous Painters of Guangdong* 廣東名畫家選集 in 1961, in Canton, by the local branch of the Association of Artists. The indifferent standard of most of the works reproduced makes a striking contrast with the hyperboles used in the Introduction and the sumptuous volume. The technical quality of the reproduction is excellent but its vast size makes the book rather unwieldy. A fortune, from the province's own funds, must have been lavished on this magnificent nonentity of a work and from sheer provincial vanity. A modest documentary book would have been more to the point, costing less (at a time when China was passing through a period of austerity) and containing more relevant information.

(10) Besides the book referred to in Note (9) *supra*, see also Vol. I of 廣東文物 (Hong Kong, 1941) and 廣東名家書畫選集 (Hong Kong, 1959). In both of the last works mentioned, the reproductions are unfortunately so bad that it is sometimes hard to make them out at all.

(11) See for example Plates 78, 79 and 80 of 廣東名畫家選集 and also a beautiful painting in Lee Kwok-wing's private collection, which seems to be the pair of Plate 80 from Canton.

(12) In Hong Kong and Macao alone, there are at the very least 300 of his works and a careful search might well reveal twice this number. It should therefore be relatively easy to make a systematic study of this painter, who illustrates so typically the spirit of Guangdong. Lee Kwok-wing made a first step in this direction (as he also did later for Su Renshan) when in 1965 he organised an exhibition in the City Hall of the Su Liupeng paintings from his collection. He also published an illustrated monograph on this subject (Lee Kwok-wing: *Su Liu-p'eng*, Chinese text and English translation, 18 plates, City Hall Museum, Hong Kong 1965). Generally speaking, in Hong Kong there is abundant material for study of Cantonese painting. It is regrettable that so far the authorities and responsible institutions have made no effort at all to regroup and preserve a collection of these paintings. If nothing is done, they will continue to be dispersed and eventually they will all disappear.

(13) These two features characterise all other expressions of the art and culture of Guangdong. Without going so far as to suggest a visit to the Tiger Balm Gardens of Hong Kong (some prudish souls might contend—I think wrongly—that this too is an expression of art and culture) take the example of Cantonese opera. Beside the nobility and hieratic formalism of Peking opera or the musical, wheedling opera of Shaoxing, Cantonese opera seems painfully crude and vulgar. And yet, perhaps because of its inferior artistic standard, it is in some ways livelier, more real and in closer touch with its public and the times (the librettos of Cantonese opera are

stuffed with allusions to contemporary events) than the highly stylised northern opera, whose very qualities depend on a certain archaicism. While speaking of revolutionary innovations, the recent fuss in Peking about substituting a piano for the traditional orchestra of classical opera, should not make us forget that such a revolution was made fifty years ago in Cantonese opera. Foreign instruments (like the saxophone and violin) were at that time incorporated in the orchestra and in a much more subtle and natural way.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER II

(1) The exceptions are Wang Zhaoyong 汪兆鏞, Ma Guoquan 馬國權, Li Tianma 李天馬 and Lee Kwok-wing 李國榮 (for complete references, see Bibliography *infra*; in this text, I usually limit myself to indicating the works consulted by simply mentioning the author's name). All these authors think Renshan was the personal name, not the courtesy name.

We might nevertheless add that Wang Zhaoyong erroneously mentions 'Bihuo' 必獲 as a literary name of Su Renshan's; in fact this is the courtesy name of Su Renshan's younger brother. Ma Guoquan commits the same error, relying no doubt on Wang's work. This second mistake is even more surprising because later in his text, Ma refers to the *Su Clan Register* which he must therefore have consulted.

As for 'Changchun', Wang Zhaoyong and Li Tianma both think it was Su Renshan's courtesy name (字); Ma Guoquan and Lee Kwok-wing think it was a literary name (號). 'Chun' is written 椿 by Wang Zhaoyong; Li Tianma points out the alternative version 椿 or 春. Although they had seen the *Su Clan Register* (where 'Chun' is written 椿) both Ma and Lee wrote 春. Finally, Ma classes Jingfu 靜甫 as courtesy name 字, when it was very evidently a literary name 號. Such endless divergences of opinion are hardly surprising; the different authors quoted are writing at ease, relying on memory, without any intention of being strictly exact about such a trivial detail. (好讀書不求甚解!). It is our incongruous ex-actitude and meticulousness that creates complications.

(2) See for example Cat. 6, 7, 318.

(3) See Cat. 2, Plate 1. 'Chun' is written 春.

(4) A copy of the note in the *Su Clan Register*, dealing with Su Renshan, was kindly communicated to me by Mr. Lee Kwok-wing. He obtained it from someone who, a few years ago, saw the original in China. Here is the complete text of the excerpt:

蘇家族譜廣東順德杏壇鄉

十八世祖考諱仁山。號長椿。乃引壽公之長子也。其妻尚未過門。未嘗合卺禮。故無所出。狂溺於書畫。最善意筆。價值不貲。惜壽享與顏子同。以胞姪少彭繼之。

"Ancestor of the 18th generation, personal name Renshan, literary name Changchun; eldest son of Master Yinshou. His wife never crossed his threshold and his marriage was not consummated so he had no descendants. He had a passion for calligraphy and painting, excelled in the impromptu style and his works are priceless. Alas, his life was as brief as Yan Hui's. He was succeeded by his nephew Shaopeng."

This note raises two problems—one concerning Su Renshan's marriage and the other, his age when he died; we will return to them later.

(5) The only known example of this seal being used is on a landscape painting (called *The Travellers*) in Lee Kwok-wing's collection (Cat. 249, Plate 42). The

wording of the seal is: "Personal name: Renshan; courtesy name: Jingfu; surname: Zhurong; native of Guangdong" 名仁山字靜甫姓祝融氏嶺南人也。

(6) Some have mistakenly said that he was a native of Magi 馬齊 (remark of Jen You-wen).

(7) There is evidence of this prosperity in the gastronomy of the region; Shunde cuisine is considered the best in Guangdong.

(8) Chen Tieer 陳鐵兒 records that his personal name was Renshou 忍壽 but this is probably an error. In Cantonese, 'ren' 忍 and 'yin' 引 are homophonous, hence, no doubt, the confusion. According to Baer Laoren 二八老人, his personal name was Fangshu 方叔, but he is a dubious source.

(9) Only Jen You-wen mentions this courtesy name. He found it on a painting of Su Renshan's dated 1829 (己丑). To-day, Jen does not know what has become of this painting and I have found no trace of it.

(10) These facts about Su Yinshou were given to Jen You-wen by Liu Tao 劉濤 (courtesy name Yian 一庵). Liu Tao, born in 1892, is a painter who comes from Fengjian 逢簡, in Shunde prefecture. It was also Liu Tao who supplied the information used by other authors quoted later in the text. He will be mentioned again in the chapter dealing with forgeries. A fake Su Renshan (one in a very curious 'industrialised' series of four pieces) bears an inscription written in his hand (Cat. 228).

In the course of this work, we will often refer to hearsay collected from people who were originally from Shunde. These sources are not usually verifiable but faced with the almost total absence of testimony from his own period, we have to extract as much information as possible from local tradition, on which Su Renshan's eccentric personality seems to have made a particularly vivid impression. The inevitable distortions due to time and distance, that must usually be taken into account when relying on such sources, are in this case relatively small, because Su Renshan's period is comparatively close to our own and his native region adjoins Hong Kong.

(11) In the *Su Clan Register* (see note 12 below), Su Jixiang, Su Renshan's younger brother, is said to be Su Yinshou's *third* son.

(12) As already shown above, the courtesy name Bihuo is mistakenly attributed to Su Renshan in the *Lingnan Hua Zheng Lue*.

Here is the text of the note on Jixiang in the *Su Clan Register* (a copy of this note was kindly communicated to me by Lee Kwok-wing. See also above, note 4).

十八世祖考諱吉祥。號如意。字必獲。善於描畫。與兄仁山字畫媲美。無分伯仲。配室李氏。大良人。無出。此乃引壽公之三子也。

"Ancestor of the eighteenth generation, personal name Jixiang, literary name Ruyi, courtesy name Bihuo. He showed talent in painting. His calligraphy and painting rivalled that of Renshan's, his older brother, in beauty and it was impossible to decide which of the two most excelled. He married a certain Li, from Daliang. He had no offspring. He was the third son of messire Yinshou."

(14) We do not know what has become of the painting in question. Three versions of the inscription have been preserved. (1) About 30 years ago, Jen You-wen made a copy from the original which, he tells me, was in a friend's collection but he does not remember whose. (2) Ruopo 若波 (pen name of the Cantonese painter and connoisseur, Huang Banruo 黃般若 (1901–1968)) published another version in the artistic supplement *Yilin* 藝林 of the Hong Kong daily newspaper, *Da Gong Bao* 大公報 (this article was included in the collected edition of these artistic supplements; see 藝林叢錄, Hong Kong 1962, vol. 3, pp 75–76 蘇長春其人其藝). The text of the inscription was communicated to Ruopo by a certain Lu Zishu 盧子樞: “. . . Mr. Lu Zishu once had occasion to see a painting of Su Renshan's, a vertical scroll on silk, entitled *Landscape in the style of Wen Zhengming*. The inscription accompanying it was an autobiography of Su's (. . .). Unfortunately I do not know what has happened to this painting. . . .” (3) A third version was published by Lee Kwok-wing in his monograph on Su Renshan. Lee no longer remembers from where he obtained the text.

Twenty-eight words of an introduction are mentioned only by Ruopo: 倣文衡山先生畫意, 先生名璧, 字徵明, 衡山其號也, 事行詳明史文苑傳.

[illegible]

Jen	雖左右與食弗食四齡父教以區正叔三字經
Ruopo	
Lee	
Jen	至是始知書亦不及畫五齡六齡嗜寫字遇門牆
Ruopo	
Lee	
Jen	垣壁無不學書七齡八齡能畫山水景物題句頗
Ruopo	
Lee	
Jen	能道說景中意九齡出館就傳受經日受經書數過
Ruopo	傳授     授○
Lee	傳授     授○
Jen	不暇計畫十齡十一齡間以學誦之餘及畫十二齡
Ruopo	
Lee	
Jen	而畫著閭里十三齡名動庠士十四齡出遊羊城
Ruopo	
Lee	
Jen	十五齡嗜臨盈尺漢隸十六齡學舉業十七齡嗜
Ruopo	○ ○ ○
Lee	畫及
Jen	詩賦十八齡嗜理學十九齡赴督學試不遇廿齡
Ruopo	
Lee	
Jen	博覽策學廿一齡就傳兼習當代典禮廿二齡赴
Ruopo	○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
Lee	○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
Jen	試仍不遇廿三齡決志去試藝而畫復辟嗜焉
Ruopo	○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
Lee	○ ○ ○ ○                         ○ ○ ○ ○
Jen	廿四適蒼梧廿五遊桂林巖洞廿七始圖居室大倫
Ruopo	○ ○                 岩
Lee	岩

Jen	〇〇廿八而悔言行多謬矣故記之時道光廿一年
Ruopo	今年
Lee	今年
Jen	歲次辛丑冬十〇月中旬二日晝於仙城順德蘇
Ruopo	—   〇〇〇〇
Lee	〇   下       〇〇〇〇〇〇〇〇〇
Jen	仁山識
Ruopo	
Lee	〇〇〇

Apart from the introduction only found in Ruopo's version, Jen's version is the most complete. It is notable for its mention of a *second failure in the examinations*, an event mentioned in neither Lee's nor Ruopo's texts (but it is confirmed in a second 'autobiography', see *infra*, note 20). The gap in Ruopo's version, immediately after the words "at the age of twenty-one" is very serious, because it gives the reader the false impression that it was when Su Renshan was twenty-one that he went to Cangwu, whereas in fact he went when he was twenty-four. The other variations are mainly copying errors and do not raise problems. For example in the Lee version, 晝及 seems to be a misreading of 盈尺. Jen's text, which on the whole seems to be the best, can nevertheless be amended in certain parts, thanks to the two other versions: thus 病 should be corrected to 疾, 傳 to 傳, and 今年 should be added before 廿八. Note the differences in the dates: 12th day of the 10th month for Jen, 22nd day of the 10th month for Lee and 11th month for Ruopo. In this case, it is impossible to choose between the three versions.

(15) "... I lived by my brush": 筆畊硯曉 it is from this and other expressions taken out of context, that Jen You-wen concludes that Su Renshan earned his living as a schoolmaster. The term in question covers all activities involving the use of brush and ink—painting and calligraphy (the context certainly suggests that it is in this sense we should interpret it) and also the various work of secretaries, scribes and copyists. Covering a wide field of intellectual work, it does not exclude teaching, but it is far from specifically implying this. It is not impossible that Su Renshan taught, as a village primary schoolteacher or as a family tutor (this was the main employment open to failed candidates of the Civil Service examinations) but this hypothesis, reasonable though it sounds, is not backed by any proof.

(16) The meaning of this passage is obscure.

(17) The *Three Words Classic* 三字經: an elementary teaching manual of literary language, dating from the Song period. It is composed of three word verses, easy to memorise and, using just over a thousand different characters, it covers a wide field of elementary learning. For nearly seven centuries, Chinese children have been initiated in the written language by this little book.



- (18) Models of essays, used for preparing the Civil Service examinations.
- (19) Cangwu 蒼梧, i.e. Wuzhou 梧州; an important town in Guangxi, on the border between this province and Guangdong.
- (20) 余四歲受經于庭訓。十有六齡出就外傳。至廿有一齡成文藝儒業之事而歸。處箠筆挾策俯誦兩三年。試於督學。兩不遇。慨然思遠遊。適桂林。遊遍岩洞...

The painting on which this inscription was found, *Evanescent Silhouette of a Mountain* 一痕山影淡如無, used to be in Jen's private collection but today it seems to have disappeared. The text of the inscription has been preserved in a manuscript copy made by Jen while he still had the painting. According to Jen's notes, the painting was dated 1842.

- (21) See album in the Suma collection (Cat. 167-175) made when Su Renshan was thirteen (western way of counting age), the *Landscape* in the Jen collection (Cat. 2, Plate 1) and above all the *Landscape with buildings* in the He Jun-liang collection (Cat. 318, Plate 2), both painted when Su Renshan was fourteen (western way of counting age).

- (22) Anecdote related by Li Fanfu 李凡夫.

- (23) Sometimes the obstinate persevering of certain candidates was rewarded with an honorary title of Bachelor. In the early 19th century Kang Hui 康輝, ancestor of Kang Youwei 康有為, was thus rewarded when he was eighty years old! The Kang family (which came from Nanhai) then started to hold some position among the local elite.

- (24) The glory: note, for example, the care taken by compilers of local chronicles or Clan Registers to enumerate the Bachelors and Licentiates who were natives of their district or belonged to their clan. This, the excessive vanity of the mandarins, was so deep rooted that it has survived to our own time, even among people whose revolutionary ideas should long ago have abolished such prejudices. (e.g. The way in which Guo Moruo, early in his autobiography, notes that his native village succeeded in producing ten Bachelors; despite deliberately affected irony, his complacency is obvious.) Obsession with the mandarin examinations, drummed into their very souls after more than fifteen centuries' practice, survives in the sub-conscious mind of modern Chinese society, at least in Taiwan, Hong Kong and South East Asia. Even in People's China, the Cultural Revolution showed up the persistent hold that these mandarin-like prejudices still had upon people. In modern communities, ambition has been channelled into schools and Universities, and school certificates, degrees and doctorates have become substitutes for the former titles of xiucai, juren and jinshi. (In Taiwan, the old honorific title of Zhuangyuan 狀元 formerly given to the three best candidates in the highest imperial examination, has been pompously restored and it was once bestowed on the candidate who came first in the State University Doctorate.) These certificates have taken on a significance that is quite disproportionate to their practical value and they are pursued with desperate ardour. Gowns and mortar-boards, imported to Singapore, Hong-Kong and Taiwan from the English Universities, have been

hugely successful. Graduates returning to their home village decked in their academic wreaths, are paraded through the streets amidst the spluttering and banging of fireworks, to the glory of the family and the envy and admiration of the neighbours—just like the *xiuca* in the days of the Empire. The fact that these mandarin-like decorations no longer have any material advantage attached to them, has not yet succeeded in lowering their prestige value which is based on too old an historical tradition and possesses roots that run too deeply into the unconscious, for that. Universities for the most part only lead their students to intellectual unemployment but they continue to be invaded and filled to their maximum capacity, while professional and technical schools, that guarantee sure and profitable careers to their graduates, find few recruits. The latter are not qualified to award gown and mortarboard to their graduates and for many young people, and their families too, the hope of one day hanging up a photograph of themselves disguised as a modern mandarin, is far more important than the possibility of living decently and having enough to eat.

(25) This second failure is mentioned in the Jen version of the 'autobiography' (see *supra*, Note 14) and also in the text of the second 'autobiography' (also recorded by Jen, see *supra*, Note 20).

(26) See the famous episodes in *Unofficial Chronicle of the Literati* 儒林外史,\* a classical novel and masterpiece written by Wu Jingzi 吳敬梓 (1701–1754). Zhou Jin was an old candidate who, having several times failed the examinations, eventually gave up trying and became an accountant for a group of merchants. One day, he visited the Examination Hall with them. This visit suddenly brought back his old obsession, too long buried and he collapsed in a nervous breakdown, burst into tears, spat blood and fell into a semi-coma (chap. 2 and 3). Fan Jin is a needy scholar living off his father-in-law, a butcher, who reviles him and humiliates him constantly. Against all hope, Fan Jin eventually passes the examinations but the news is too sudden and he faints. He is revived but has lost his reason! However he recovers well enough to enjoy finding himself transformed into an important and prosperous man, overwhelmed by homage and gifts from the celebrities of the region (Chap. 4). Of course, the romanesque fiction and the satirical intention of the author leads to some passages being exaggerated, for caricature. However, on the whole, quite apart from its literary merit, this book reflects the customs of the literati class in an extraordinarily complete, accurate and vivid way.

(27) F. Michael and C. L. Chang: *The Taiping Rebellion—History and Documents*, University of Washington Press, Seattle and London 1966, vol. 1, pp. 22–23.

(28) This inscription is found on the *Landscape dedicated to Huangcun* in Lee Kwok-wing's collection (Cat. 251, Plates 12, 58). Here is the complete text:

畫村兄屬畫時壬寅秋九月下浣八日也

胸有不平情欲鼓豪俠氣事功豈不成恐傷父母意哀嗟托末技夙夜不能已  
家國繫此身禍亂徒坐視撥亂圖治才得賢貴及時獨坐三自反重周韓責己合乎

\* (*The Scholars*, translated by Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang, Peking Foreign Language Press, 196 ).

古人道兵刑先錯之衣食足民生禮樂乃興矣詎徒事文章惻怛誰復知狂獗未協中尙與鄉愿異死生非輕置務使後人視是以觀青史備見經濟意忠以與人言恕以許人志荒廢已多年秋風生庭樹今日感秋風歲寒先屈指仁山

“Offered to my esteemed friend Huangcun, the twenty-eighth of the 9th month of the year renyin (1842).

My heart is full of indignation; I dream of being a hero, of redressing wrongs. Why should my plans not succeed? But I'm afraid of offending my parents. I expend the rage in my heart on futile paintings. I torment myself unceasingly, day and night: I belong entirely to my country and yet here am I, a spectator of this tragedy. If we hope to restore order in political affairs, we must rely on the opportune appearance of virtuous and eminent men. Examining my conscience, with gravity and strictness as recommended by Han Yu, I confess my faults. According to the teaching of the Ancients, one must first renounce violence through the use of arms or through the law, supply the people amply with the clothing and food they need, then the civilisation will flourish. How can I content myself with blackening sheets of paper? No one can understand my lamentable condition! I have not yet found a path that will lead me between temerity on the one hand and faint-heartedness on the other but at least I am not like these village hypocrites. Neither life nor death should be treated lightly; what is important is to make them worthy for posterity. This is why we must meditate on examples from history, speak loyally and behave generously. Now, in a garden abandoned for too many years, the winds of autumn stir the leaves. Today, moved by an autumn breeze, I count the years that have fled. Renshan.”

Note that the dedication and date are at the head of the inscription instead of in their usual position at the end. The reason for this departure from custom is probably simply that Su Renshan had not at the beginning anticipated the length of his inscription and found himself cramped along the edge of the painting when he still had the dedication to write. The only remaining available space was at the head of his inscription.

(29) The year of his marriage is mentioned in the first ‘autobiography’.

Bear Laoren adds that his wife was called Li 李, However, the *Su Clan Register* states that Su Renshan's younger brother married a girl with this name, a native of Daliang. Maybe Baer Laoren confused them. As we have already pointed out, the information in these sources is very dubious.

(30) A peasant who came from Daliang (the administrative centre of Shunde prefecture) described to me how ‘the sisters’, under the pretext of helping the bride prepare herself, sewed and tied her up in swathes of underclothes, supposed to discourage the new husband.

(31) Probably, only an anthropological study carried out in the field could elucidate the meaning and origins of this custom. In Hong Kong, most people coming from Shunde know that it was current. Intellectuals are unable to explain it because studying such primitive, folk customs is beneath their dignity. As for peasant informers, they know all about the phenomenon but can give only improvised and rudimentary explanations. Some people simply think the girls were lesbians

(兩相知); this explanation, even if corroborated by appearances, is obviously a confusion of cause with effect. In a conservative, patriarchal, peasant society, where everyone and everything was tightly bound to the authority of the head of the family and where women lived in subjection, it is impossible that independent communities of young girls could have developed out of the caprice and individuality of the interested parties. Some features of the custom—the association of these communities of virgins with the raising of silkworms, the brief annual reunion of husband and wife, which is only changed to permanent cohabitation after the woman has become pregnant—quite naturally make us think back to practices current in archaic Chinese society. Similar customs have also been retained by some primitive minorities. Is this an instance of the isolated survival of a custom which dates back several millenia? We know too little to decide but one thing is certain: in such a rigid social context as that of the villages of Guangdong, for such a display of independence by non-emancipated adolescent girls and young brides in hiding to be tolerated, it must have been sanctioned by a very old and venerable tradition if even the authority of the family had to bend before it.

We might finally note that even today in Hong Kong, 'sisterhood' associations are found among some groups of women from the lower class (who are also mainly from Shunde prefecture) and these may well derive from the practices mentioned above. These women remain virgin and usually seek posts as servants in rich families; they wear a distinctive dress and do their hair in a particular way: a long plait down the middle of the back. If one of them is out of work or sick or when she becomes too old to work, she is cared for by her 'sisters'. The association thus takes over the role of a 'union', which otherwise, in Chinese society, is played by the family.

(32) Chen Ticer.

(33) These poems are found inscribed on four leaflets of a 26-page album (Cat. 75, 76, 77, 78):

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 1. 樛木枝垂藤蔓纏<br>石堅猶似妾心堅<br>思卿有似東風發<br>葉解柔條花解妍 | 3. 松濤寫入畫中看<br>半寫松濤半寫寒<br>思卿有似蒼松節<br>冰雪深時也肯安 |
| 2. 溪澗苔深石滑涼<br>泠泠泉咽古琴張<br>思卿有似芭蕉雨<br>滴去滴還夜漏長 | 4. 垂楊風弄媚三春<br>柳眼垂青月半輪<br>思卿有似垂楊月<br>鏡裏娥眉畫裏顰 |

(34) Lee Kwok-wing, p. 9: 母號寒。妻啼飢。與韓愈同。但愈出而吾處。愈有常錄而吾無定所。

(35) Sojourn in Daliang: see He Juefu and Lee Kwok-wing. The sojourn in Daliang was mentioned by Xian Baogan (see also *infra*, Note 40).

(36) I wonder also whether Jen You-wen is not unconsciously trying to accentuate parallels in the lives of Su and Hong, forcing the latter to lend his profession to Su. Jen You-wen, whose work on the history of the Taiping is an authority on the

subject (太平天國全史 Hong Kong 1962), 3 vols.) is also the author of an important chronological biography of Hong Xiuquan (洪秀全載記, Hong Kong 1967).

(37) The expression is 筆畊硯畹歷多年矣, seen above at the beginning of the first 'autobiography'.

Of the two other expressions, 硯田 is found on the painting *Pine, banana tree and bamboos* (Li Jung-sen's 利榮森 collection, reproduced in Lee Kwok-wing, Plate 16; Cat. 305). 有硯可耕田 appears in a poem (quoted by Jen) on *Painting in the style of the Yuan*. This painting seems to have disappeared.

(38) This point of ethics was binding for many artists and still is at the present time. Among the great modern painters, Qi Baishi 齊白石 was one of the very few who sold his work openly, unashamedly fixing his tariff at so much per square foot. Some painters who stick rigidly to the principle, never selling their paintings and only giving them to those capable of appreciation, make their living by selling, if not faking, old paintings! Others solve the problem by 'giving' large numbers of their paintings to certain friends, who are in fact their agents and undertake to sell the paintings. One famous contemporary painter used to give away his paintings very generously to visitors, but these had no seal marked on them. To obtain the seal imprint, without which a Chinese painting is incomplete, one had to ask his wife, who kept the seals under lock and key and a sum of money had to be paid to get them out. I might hasten to add that I know also of painters, usually among the better ones, who have chosen to live in poverty and whose real disinterestedness is very impressive: once a painting is finished it is given away either to a friend, to a pupil or even to a passing acquaintance. Today, most traditional painters live by teaching in Universities or Academies or by giving lessons to private pupils.

(39) Mentioned by Wang Yilun 王益倫.

(40) See Xian Baogan: "... in the years Daoguang/Xianfeng, Su Renshan spent a long time at the home of an official of the Court of Justice, Liang Fucao (Liang Jiutu). He made a painting showing the Studio of the Twelve Rocks (the residence of Liang) ..."

Xian Baogan's reference to "in the years Daoguang/Xianfeng" has given a misleading idea of the date of this visit to Foshan, implying that Su Renshan lived until the reign of Xianfeng (1851-1861). Shang Chengzuo fell into this error and some writers therefore thought the visit was made *after* Su Renshan left prison (Lee Kwok-wing). In fact, we now know that Su Renshan must have died in 1849 or 1850 and that his stay in Foshan must have been *before* his imprisonment. The imprisonment, in Shunde, was the very *last* episode in his life. (It would anyway have been highly unlikely that an official like Liang Jiutu would have shown himself ready to welcome an ex-convict, charged with the infamous crime of 'filial impiety' in his home.)

The sojourn in Foshan was probably around 1849-1850; 1842 or 1848 are two other logically possible dates because we have no biographical information concerning these two years.

For Liang Tiutu 梁九圖 (courtesy name Fucao 福草), see the Wang Zhaoyong's note (Book 6, p. 22), also Xian Yuqing 洗玉清 (廣東之鑑藏家 in 廣東文物, III,

10, p. 992). Liang was a mandarin (刑部主事). He was an amateur painter and was known in particular for his paintings of orchids (Jen You-wen has one in his collection). He has also left us a collection of essays on poetry (十二石山齋詩話). He was a native of Shunde and settled in Foshan with his cousin, Liang Jiuzhang 梁九章 (courtesy name Yunshang 雲嫦). The latter specialized in painting plum blossoms and had a large collection of paintings and calligraphies. Jiuzhang had a passion for stones (miniature rocks with strange contorted shapes, microcosms suggesting the macrocosm, are the object of keen attention from Chinese aesthetes). The cousins christened their Foshan residence "Studio of the Twelve Rocks". Their uncle, Liang Airu 梁藹如, had been quite an important man, a high official, poet, calligrapher and painter and friend of the famous painter Xie Lansheng 謝蘭生. The son of Liang Airu, Liang Bangjun 梁邦俊, who was also a mandarin, painted and wrote poetry too.

According to Lee Kwok-wing, Liang Jiutu was a cousin of Su Renshan's. I have found no information that could confirm this.

(41) Long Yuangfen 龍元份 (courtesy names Junru 均如 and Bingi 賓七) was an official who was an amateur painter. His two brothers Yuanxi 元僖 and Yuanren 元任 were both mandarins. Yuanren also painted but was equally a poet (see notes about them by Wang Zhaoyong, Book 7, p. 5).

(42) See *infra*, Note 52.

(43) The manner in which the well-off elite amused themselves supporting eccentric 'clients', is also remarkably well illustrated in the *Unofficial Chronicle of the Literati* (episode of the Lou brothers, chap. 9-13).

The obsessional fear of being 'vulgar' or 'banal' 俗, so common among the educated upper class, had a sterilising influence on a considerable part of Chinese artistic and literary production, reducing it to gimmickry of doubtful taste. The most spontaneous gestures and the originality of famous poets and painters—even the fortuitous accidents in their lives—immediately became formalized and fixed, repeated a hundred times by innumerable imitators, eager to prove their 'elegant' taste 雅. The society of the mandarins and the bourgeoisie was riddled with drawing-room 'hermits' 隱士 and 'mountain men' 山人, who took the utmost care never to have to leave their urban surroundings and knew nature only through paintings—picturesque bohemians who steered their craft with clear and calculating brains. A systematic search for the rare and the exquisite was destroying the soul and cramping the style of poetry and painting.

(44) Inscription added by Su Ruohu 蘇若瑚 on to a painting of Su Renshan's (see *infra*, Appendix: Sources, concerning Su Ruohu) *Bodhidharma* (Cat. 58)

(45) Xian Baogan.

(46) Su Ruohu (see *supra*, Note 44).

(47) *Landscape in imitation of Li Sixun* 臨李思訓山水 (Cat. 27, Plate 54).

(48) With the sole possible exception of a painting dedicated to a certain Wen 溫 (溫門一樂圖 *The Flautist*, Cat. 109), who may have been a descendant of Wen Rugua, mentioned later on.

(49) He Juefu, Lee Kwok-wing.

(50) He Juefu, Lee Kwok-wing. The inscription on a painting (referred to by Lee, p. 7; the painting is reproduced in Lee, Plate 16. *Infra*, Cat. 286) alludes to these retreats he made into Nature: "I leaf through my books under a dead tree; when twilight comes, I fall asleep on the grass" 蕭蕭枯木,展書往復。日之夕矣。依草以宿。

(51) 人皆謂我玩世。豈知余者並世無知己。惟尙友古人而已。 Mentioned by He Juefu.

(52) He Juefu.

(53) Wen Rugua 溫汝适 (1750–1814), courtesy name Yusi 譽斯, literary name Shuinan 水南; high official, amateur painter (figures), calligrapher (cursive) and seal engraver; collector of paintings and calligraphy who had also inherited a large family collection. His brother Rusui 汝遂, courtesy name Suizhi 遂之, literary name Zhumengsheng 竹夢生, refused to enter the Civil Service and made himself quite a reputation as a painter (bamboos), calligrapher, connoisseur and collector of paintings and ancient bronzes. A third brother, Rushu 汝述, was a landscape painter. (See Xian Yuqing, *op. cit.* p. 985 and Wang Zhaoyong, Book 4, pp. 16–17.) The Wen clan lived in Longshan 龍山 (prefecture of Shunde).

(54) Anecdote recorded by Chen Tieer.

(55) One of the reasons for these low prices, was that all painters found themselves caught up in the game of social relations and obligations and a large proportion of their works had to be given away. An amateur of art rarely had to buy a contemporary painting, if he was in a powerful position. He simply made use of his connections, or the connections of connections, who would see to it that the painter in question executed one and also added a personal dedication for him. The constant pressure of these innumerable demands was not without its detrimental effect on the work of famous artists, who were thus made to work in a hasty and repetitive manner (some painters even came to the point of having to hire assistants who could imitate their style and, unless the supplicator was a man of first rank and importance, merely added an inscription and a seal to this work).

All this is still true today. The works of painters such as Qi Baishi 齊白石, Huang Binhong 黃賓虹, Fu Baoshi 傅抱石, who despite official recognition of their merit and of their authors having been canonised by the nation, were sold at prices that were derisory compared with the reputations of the men; (after the deaths of these artists, commercial speculation, stimulated by the increasing interest of western collectors, led to a rise in prices and in the case of Qi and Fu, these were multiplied ten times within a few years).

(56) This practice of making robot-portraits, so characteristic of the Chinese mentality, is illustrated in a most striking manner by classical opera masks. Each of the main historical characters presented has a specific face make-up which makes it possible to identify him at a glance. Colours play an important part in the make-up, having abstract, symbolic, interchangeable significance, indicating traits of temperament. It is the amount and combination of these coloured elements which make a mask individual and unique for each character.

The conception of a robot-portrait (in the modern and technical sense of the term, for example, as used by the western police to help track down a criminal), is based on the idea that the global physical appearance of a person, or the totality of his moral personality, is essentially a unique sum of a series of universal element-types. This idea is very old in China. Painters commissioned to make portraits of ancestors who had disappeared long ago, made their choice among a selection of noses, foreheads, eyes, ears etc., according to the information supplied. The information might describe only moral and psychological traits of characters: the science of physiognomy (the exceptional development of which is, in China, also symptomatic) made it possible to transpose these moral traits into physical features. In the intellectual field, the historiographer dealing with a character from the past, used essentially the same method.

(57) Zhang Liang 張良 (*Historical Records*, 55) although a noble by birth, who had already shown himself to be heroic and daring, submitted in a docile manner to the insulting order of a ragged, unknown old man who summoned him to pick up his sandal. After another humiliating test, the old man gave him an ancient manual about the art of war and Zhang Liang became one of the greatest strategists of his time.

The Lord of Xinling (prince of Wei 魏公子) (*Historical Records* 77) wishing to gain the friendship of the solitary Hou Ying, who lived in poverty, started by sending him rich presents. Hou Ying rejected these gifts. The Lord of Xinling then organized a grand banquet in his honour and came with a coach to fetch him. Hou Ying humiliated his host publicly, authoritatively settling himself in the best seat and insisting that a detour be made through the market-place so that he, Hou Ying, might speak to a butcher friend, on the way. Hou Ying deliberately prolonged this discussion, obliging the Lord of Xinling to stand stupidly in front of the coach, watched by the crowd. The Lord of Xinling neither lost his patience nor his temper and eventually took Hou Ying to his palace and led him to the seat of honour. Having thus sounded the modesty and sincerity of his host, Hou Ying finally put an end to his testing and forthwith gave the Lord of Xinling help and advice that later proved to be decisive.

(58) This way of referring any given material situation to a recognised prototype, is well illustrated by a characteristic procedure of Chinese literature: *the use of diangu* 典故 or historico-literary allusion. To convey their thoughts, express personal feelings or refer to current facts and circumstances, prosewriters and poets constantly used expressions that appear cryptic to the uneducated reader but whose mere mention—formulated even in a half-word—immediately recalls to the mind of an educated reader, an exemplary anecdote from ancient history or classical literature, making the meaning of the author evident. For example, in a certain sung poem (to the air 水龍吟), it is sufficient for Xin Qiji 辛棄疾 to merely mention *the name of a certain fish dish*, for the reader straight away to think back to a classical anecdote about an official who, employed in the Capital and having one day an irresistible urge to go and eat this fish in the way it was prepared in his faraway native province, resigned from his post and returned to his home village. The two words of allusion give us a complete understanding of Xin's state of mind and even of his political



opinions. He came from north China and followed the court of the Song into the South, when it fled there for refuge, abandoning the country to barbarian invaders. His position as a high official did not console Xin sufficiently for his exile and resentful at the slackness and inefficiency of the diminished Empire, he became a passionate advocate of the reconquest of the lost lands. Again, in the introduction of a sung poem (to the air 一萼紅), Chiang K'ui 姜夔 recalling an excursion into the mountains, says he was "wearing clogs". This seemingly innocuous detail immediately evokes the echo of a famous anecdote, to any educated mind and the description of Nature given acquires overtones of a reflection on the passing of time. The original anecdote relates how a scholar at the time of the Six Dynasties became famous because he spent his time hammering and mending clogs. When one day he was asked why he had chosen this unusual pastime, he replied "How many pairs of clogs does a man wear in a life-time?" "Wearing clogs" has therefore acquired a connotation for serene, ironic detachment from the vanities of human concern and the brevity of life. What is particularly interesting in the second example is that it not only entered literary language as an exemplary allusion but also *found its way into daily use* to describe a stereotyped pattern of behaviour. Generations of snobs amused themselves tapping out clogs to prove that they had 'original' temperaments and led idly elegant lives!

(59) On the one hand the first 'autobiography' and on the other, a small horizontal scroll *In the style of Su Dongpo* 臨蘇東坡畫法 (Cat. 9, Plate 7).

(60) *Lie Zi in a landscape* 列子像 (Cat. 14).

(61) Album of manuscript texts, Suma collection (Cat. 27, Plate 53).

(62) *Landscape in imitation of Li Sixun* 臨李思訓山水 (Cat. 27, plate 53).

(63) See *supra*, Note 40.

(64) I. The first 'autobiography' (1841) tells of "numerous errors" of which he was guilty "in word and deed" and of which he repented.

II. A figure painting (1842) (Cat. 10, Plate 62) bears a phrase "now that my family affairs are in such disarray how can I realize my ambitions? I gnaw out my heart but find no rest" 今因宗族事不斷理者，將胡以遂志耶。此心耿耿而不寐 (see also *infra*, Note 68).

III. *Landscape dedicated to Huangcun* (1842) (Lee Kwok-wing collection, Cat. 25, Plates 12, 58) whose very important inscription has been studied above (*supra*, Note 28).

(65) Private letter addressed to Jen You-wen.

(66) In theory, such extortion would not have been unlikely. Painters who did not belong to the Civil Service were very much at the mercy of the whims and abuse of mandarins. See, for example, the various cases mentioned (for the Ming period) by N. L. Wu (*Tung Ch'i-ch'ang: Apathy in Government and Fervour in Art*, in *Confucian Personalities* edited by A. F. Wright and D. Twitchett, Stanford 1962 pp. 266-267): "the painter Chang Lu for instance was a commoner. An official

once forced Chang to paint a picture after he had been tortured and had had his left hand chained, leaving only his right hand free. Chou Ch'en, the teacher of T'ang Yin, was a commoner and a painter who had experienced similar treatment, and his tormentor was none other than Yen Sung himself. Both painters had tried to evade their ruling officials, and thus enraged them. The great Shen Chou (1427-1509) was once ordered to paint a mural, which he quietly did, even though this had been someone's scheme to embarrass him. Judging from the tone in which the anecdote is narrated, Shen Chou might have called influential friends to his rescue and thus avoided a demeaning task. But he considered it his duty to answer the summons, the wicked design behind it notwithstanding. These commoner artists unable to protect themselves without help from others, were in a quite a different class from that of the scholar-official artists".

(67) 其父交遊太褻。往往代所遊強仁山爲作畫。山仁不可以時應。或終不應。遂借他事報其不孝繫之獄。久不得釋。(inscription by Su Ruohu on the painting *Bodhidharma*, Cat. 58).

(68) Continuation of the inscription quoted supra, Note 64: 財用儒生所不道。修政者以公之天下。故聖人修己理物不苟於一毫而私於己。所以道不拾遺也。

(69) See, for example, Plate 63, 65.

(70) See, for example, Plate 64.

(71) In order better to understand the attitude of the father and the elders of the clan, one should recall that the crime of rebellion was punished with atrocious severity. The authority of the dynasty was a taboo subject; the least word that was even vaguely seditious, pronounced by the foolhardy in private, was greeted with a reaction of terror and repression from the listeners (on this subject, see, for example, the remarks of Fei Xiaotong 費孝通: 皇權與紳權, Shanghai 1948, p. 3).

(72) Li Fanfu, who obtained this piece of information from Liu Tao.

(73) Calligraphy, Cat. 159.

(74) This eulogy of medicine is found in an inscription on a painting in the Suma collection (Cat. 222). The painting is certainly a forgery but this does not permit us to disregard the inscription. From its length and the nature of its content it is improbable that this is the fruit of the forger's inspiration. It is more likely that he copied the inscription from an original.

The singular respect which Su Renshan held for doctors is confirmed by the important painting *Thirteen Patriarchs of Medicine* 醫林十三聖象 (1847) (Cat. 18) and by several others depicting famous physicians from Antiquity.

At various periods of China's history, medicine was a haven for independent-minded intellectuals who, disapproving of contemporary politics, refused to integrate themselves in the system or try the examinations. In medical practice they saw an opportunity for putting their knowledge at the disposal of the people and of leading a life unfettered by worldly political servitude. It was not by chance that Liu E 劉鶚 at the end of the Empire, chose an itinerant doctor as mouth-piece and main hero in his philosopho-political critique, the famous novel *The Travels of Lao Ts'an*,\*

\* tr. by Harold Shadick, New York, Cornell University Press, 1952.

老殘遊記. It is not by sheer chance either that so many of the revolutionaries of modern China began their careers studying medicine (Sun Yat-sen, Lu Xun, Guo Moruo . . .)

(75) Like some of his masterpieces, e.g. *Buddhist Paradise*, in the Tan Tsze-chor 陳之初 collection, Singapore (Cat. 33, Plate 35).

(76) This fan (ex-collection of the late Li Fanfu, Cat. 315, Plate 60) bears a poem, the last verse of which alludes to a walk during which he stopped to listen to a sermon on western religion (步外聽洋經). The poem is followed by a short note where Su Renshan mentions the circumstances: "in Autumn, in the eighth month, having met Cai Pengzhi at the South Gate, we left the city and walked as far as the residence of the Red-heads. Here we lingered and listened to a sermon. Afterwards I wrote this." 秋八月於南門適蔡捧芝自城出遂至紅毛館步遊座聽而作。

(77) We now only have a photograph (preserved by Lee Kwok-wing; Cat. 351, Plate 59) of this painting. The original was sold by a Hong Kong dealer to an unknown person and all trace of it has been lost.

Here is the text of this extraordinary inscription:

司馬光先廟見後成婦程頤以爲未成婦次日廟見仲尼以爲天地網緼朱熹以爲岳父母家設衿褥枕帳周公旦以爲破開葫蘆瓜以飽盛酒合巹伏羲以爲陰陽異象寅卜否泰監生蘇華弟以爲用脚指作蝦公手拊去褲屣得札札賁札札動貌賁者形容之詞南海縣俗以爲殺一猪爲案以屣至出血爲建元不如是以爲非元氣林則徐以爲火滅修容慎戒必恭恭則壽作同官錄混亂滿漢有外治無內職而禁洋菸忌其燭奸擲纓洞見狐獺夢崇焉各種稗史有情無事六合之內存而不論者論之六合之外論而不議者議之故皆撰其詞擬其事而莫有據周濂溪以混沌爲太極邵雍以依互爲天地張子厚以爲藐然中處曾參以爲止至善孟軻以爲踐行孔伋以爲中庸皆房中術而枉席詞男女之夢聲也子獨以爲淳化寫字衛夫人和南不必清卿資福智果之評書無勞顧升瘞□是爲原事靜甫撰

"Sima Guang first went to the ancestral temple for the ceremony of the newly wedded husband and then performed his nuptials. Cheng Yi performed the ceremony on the following day. For Confucius, it was the cosmic union of the Yin and the Yun. According to Zhu Xi, the bride's family should provide the bedding. The duke of Zhou thought a gourd split in two" (a pun: 'split the gourd' means the bride's consummation of the marriage act) "should serve as a double cup, to toast the nuptial ceremony. Fu Xi thought that the opposing phenomena of the Yin and the Yang formed the hexagrams pei and tai. For the youngster Su Hua, the Bachelor, it is merely a matter of clutching at the bride's drawers and pulling them down with his toes, then jerking around here and there! In the prefecture of Nan-hai, according to a folk custom, a pig has its throat split to betoken the blood discharge marking the beginning of the nuptials; it is thought that otherwise there is a deficit of primordial vital energy. Lin Zexu thought we should not bother to seduce beauty but should approach the question with solemn circumspection, so as to assure longevity. Among his colleagues there were both Manchus and Chinese. Lin, who was concerned with external affairs and was not employed in the Court, forbade the

smoking of opium. He was not forgiven for his relentless foresight and he fell into disgrace. The truth of the matter was that under his gaze, monsters and evil spectres felt themselves to be unmasked. Novels are rich in intrigues but are not based on real facts. Authors discuss in them all those things which, although they exist in the Universe, are never discussed and they judge all those things which exist outside the Universe but which, while discussed, are never judged. In this way they weave their tales without a footing in reality. Zhou Dunyi thought the Great Ultimate was in the heart of chaos; for Shao Yong, Heaven and Earth mutually supported each other. Zhang Zai thought the absolute lay in contingency; for Zeng Shen, it was only attained in the Total Good. Meng Zi believed in practice, Kong Ji based himself on the Mean. All these philosophies bring us back to the only art—the art of the alcove—and to the words whispered by a man and a woman on a pillow. . . .” (the last sentences are incomprehensible).

My translation is very approximate. This fanciful and almost incoherent text is unintelligible in parts. The tartness of language, the use of dialectal expressions, the offhand humour he uses to call upon the authority of the most eminent masters of philosophy and above all, the fact that he dares to mention sexual matters in the inscription of a painting, show an extraordinary audacity. Only a few revolutionary scholars at the end of the Ming period ever dared voice such iconoclasms or showed a similar freedom of spirit. Some writers (Huang Miaozi, Ma Guoguan) have suggested that Su Renshan must have been influenced by thinkers like Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 and Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲. This is a tempting thought but cannot be confirmed. In fact, it is very unlikely that Su Renshan had the opportunity of reading the works of these philosophers.

(78) In fact—needless to say—this work, combining a deliberate contrast between the dense animation of the calligraphy and the relaxed handling of the painting, is unified by a superb pictorial logic.

(79) It is useless to try to enlarge artificially this thin dossier. Jen You-wen, following Ma Guoquan, tries to read anti-Manchu feeling into the inscription of the seal 青山不老. To achieve this, he must first twist 青 into the meaning 清 which risks introducing a misconception: it is difficult to read 不老 as “will not live to be old” whereas the opposite meaning “eternally young” seems to be obvious.

(80) He Juefu.

(81) Baer Laoren specifically claims that all the paintings bearing the seal “Princely descendant of the Han race” were destroyed by Su Renshan’s family. This is highly possible and it would explain why only one painting bearing this seal exists today. We find the same type of problem in the history of western art, for example with a painter like Bruegel: the exact nature and extent of Bruegel’s political involvement has often been discussed and various writers have tried to decode certain symbolic elements in his work, interpreting them as nationalist and accusatory. The difficulty of doing this comes precisely from the fact that the only works that have survived are those where the symbolism is so hidden, the allusion so veiled that they almost cease to be compromising. According to van Mander, Bruegel on his death-bed ordered his wife to burn “a number of his strange and complicated allegories, drawn

to perfection and bearing inscriptions” because they were “offensive and biting and he feared they could only cause trouble and complications for his wife” (quoted by P. Bianconi in *Tout l'oeuvre peint de Bruegel l'Ancien*, Paris 1968).

(82) Jen You-wen thinks this is just a lewd rumour that should not claim the attention of decent men. Lee Kwok-wing thinks the rumour was well based: if he preferred not to mention it in his monograph it was only, he told me, because he feared that mentioning it in the first work published about Su Jen-shan, would have given ‘a bad impression’ of the artist.

Chinese classical historiography made a rule of passing over all that was not quite ‘ya’ 雅 in the sources; ‘ya’ in its primary meaning—as used by a Sima Qian—(see *Historical Records* 1 五帝本紀: [余並論次, 擇其言尤雅者]), meant ‘zheng’ 正, correct, or exact. The derived meaning which it later acquired, is ‘elegant’, ‘refined’, ‘in good taste’. Many Confucian scholars used it in this second sense and when they were writing about ‘positive heroes’ they used to eliminate not only the ‘absurd’ information about them (which is what Sima Qian originally meant) but also any ‘shocking’ information—i.e. all that involved any sin against the cardinal virtues of Confucian morality. The persistence of such a traditional attitude even today is characteristic and deserves, I think, to be mentioned.

(83) This explanation was first put forward by He Juefu who was told the story by old people in Shunde. It was later also mentioned by Li Tianma. He and Li give it as one of a number of possible explanations. Baer Laoren whose tone is facetious, writing for a small scurrilous journal, presents it as a positive fact but adorns his version with a variety of picturesque detail (including some factual errors), so his testimony is eminently suspect.

(84) He Juefu, Li Tianma, Lee Kwok-wing.

(85) This inscription proves that Su Renshan was indeed incarcerated in the *yamen* prison and not locked up in a temple as Li Tianma claimed. Li put forward this theory because he did not see how Su Renshan could have continued to paint if he was really in prison. In fact, this was permitted because the gaolers were interested in procuring his paintings.

(86) As well as the remarkable little *Landscape in imitation of Li Sixun* there is also a very important album (Cat. 28–55, Plates 54–57) which dates from the period of his imprisonment.

(87) Baer Laoren.

(88) Li Tianma.

(89) The mere fact that there are no paintings dated after 1849 may seem to be an insufficient reason for claiming that Su Renshan died around 1849–1850. It must nevertheless be pointed out that all traditions agree that he died prematurely. The note in the *Su Clan Register*, comparing the brevity of his life with that of Yan Hui’s, even if it is mathematically inexact, strongly indicates this. Perhaps at some time in the future, paintings bearing an ulterior date will come to light

and oblige us to extend slightly Su Renshan's chronology. If such a rectification is necessary, I very much doubt that it will add more than two or three years to his life.

(90) 歿前預知其至。沐浴跌坐井上而逝, quoted by Lee Kwok-wing, p. 9.

(91) He Juefu, who brings up this point in his work, later informed me orally that the place in question was beside the well inside the prison.

(92) A local belief mentioned by Lee Kwok-wing.

(93) Letter addressed to Jen You-wen. Maning is at a short distance from Daliang.

(94) In South China, a burial ceremony involves two stages. First the corpse is buried in the earth in a coffin. Later on, when the flesh has decomposed and the body is reduced to a skeleton, it is exhumed. The bones are collected and placed in a covered jar which is left in the open and is the final sepulchre.

(95) Mentioned by Ma Guoquan. It is difficult to tell whether at an earlier date, Su Renshan had been expelled from his clan. Several writers mention this and Lee Kwok-wing goes as far as to say that after this event, Su Renshan refrained from using his patronym to sign paintings. This affirmation is now invalidated by signatures on later paintings (see in particular Cat. 27) which Lee had not been able to consult, at the time he was writing.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER III

(1) Liang Jiutu 梁九圖 and his brother Jiuzhang 九章, in whose house in Foshan 佛山, Su Renshan spent a long period, had important collections of paintings and calligraphies. The Wen clan 溫 from Longshan 龍山 which included acquaintances of Su Renshan's, had some reputable collectors among its members (Wen Rugua 溫汝适 and Wen Rusui 溫汝遂).

(2) See 冼玉清: [廣東之鑑藏家] in 廣東文物, III, 10, p. 982-996 about these collections.

(3) See *infra*, Plates 74-75.

(4) He Juefu, followed by Jen You-wen, believes that Su Renshan developed this stark, linear style because, during childhood, he did not have the means for procuring sufficient brushes, ink and paper and therefore drew on the ground with pointed bamboos and broken tiles. This explanation must have sprung from legend. The *Landscape* (Cat. 317, Plate 2) shows that from the age of fifteen, Su Renshan could manipulate his brush and ink with a fluency that he could only have acquired through long and assiduous practice with these instruments. Furthermore, his purely linear style is a relatively *late* development in his evolution. In most of the paintings executed before he was twenty-seven he makes use of traditional techniques.

(5) *The Handbook of Calligraphy and Painting of the Studio of the Twelve Bamboos* 十竹齋書畫譜, a collection of colour prints, started circa 1619 and finished circa 1627. This book made by Hu Zhengyan 胡正言 (scholar, official and artist, native of Anhui), marks an important step in the history of Chinese engraving, introducing a new method of colour printing by superimposing successive plates. The anthology is divided into eight parts showing successively, models of calligraphy, paintings of bamboos, plum blossoms, orchids, stones, fruits, birds and animals and monochrome ink flowers. From the time it first appeared, this anthology had a huge success and several new impressions and imitations of it were immediately made. (On the subject of Chinese wood-prints, consult the book by Wang Bomin 王伯敏: [中國版畫史], Shanghai 1961 and especially the one by Guo Weiga 郭味蕖 [中國版畫史略], Peking 1962).

(6) [臨竹莊筆], *Figures*, Cat. 318, Plate 91.

Shangguan Zhou 上官周, courtesy name Wenzuo 文佐, literary name Zhu-zhuang 竹莊. Native of Fujian, born in 1665; we do not know the date of his death but he was still alive in 1743. Very erudite, greatly interested in history, he was an able poet but has become famous above all for his painting. He specialised in figure painting and engraved and published a collection of the imaginary portraits of 120 famous figures from China's political, cultural and military history. This set of prints called *Wanxiaotang Huazhuan* 晚笑堂畫傳 has a preface by the author, dated 1743. (There is a modern facsimile edition, published by 人民美術出版社, Peking 1959). Shangguan Zhou finally settled in Canton, which explains why his

work is now found mainly in this region. (We might note that in Hong Kong, the Baolian monastery 寶蓮寺 on Lantau Island 大嶼山 has one of his paintings. Unfortunately it has been allowed to get into a shocking state of neglect).

(7) Xian Baogan 道咸間主於梁福草比部家最久。爲繪十二石齋圖(…)每語人曰。生平作畫逾千。以此圖爲最得意云。

(8) Various passages in theoretical treatises, describing the atmosphere of quasi-liturgical withdrawal which the connoisseurs felt conducive to the contemplation of their paintings, should not be understood literally. Such ethereal aesceticism was in fact practiced by a small minority and only concerned a few choice works. Paintings that did not appeal to the taste of the day could be treated quite callously (one author describes how, in the Song dynasty, paintings by Guo Xi 郭熙, who was by this time outmoded, ended up being used as dusters). Generally speaking, even in intellectual circles, and even among dealers, paintings are often handled with surprising disrespect, hung up anyhow, exposed to all the hazards of daily life, tossed about by the wind, at the mercy of childrens' games or the gambolling of cats, carelessly rolled, abandoned to cockroaches in the bottom of an old trunk. There seems a complete lack of concern as to their fate.

On a broader plane, we can say moreover that the awareness of history and the cult of Antiquity, characteristic of the Chinese mentality, essentially involve spiritual values, whose permanence is abstract. The material manifestations of the past (architectural monuments, works of art etc. . . .) are only transitory and relative expressions of these values; their preservation or destruction could not radically affect the destiny of their culture. Considering the richness and age of her civilisation, China is astonishingly poor in material testimony of her past, and the successive upheavals in her history are not alone enough to explain this dearth. Another factor increasing this negligent attitude towards works of art, has always been the confident belief that the resources of China's metamorphoses and creativity are inexhaustible. The mania for preservation, the deadly show-case mania of museums (which today in the West has reached pathological proportions), only develops when a civilisation realizes its inability to create in the present.

(9) Paintings preserved in Guangdong are submitted to an acid test. The extreme humidity and the insects are a constant menace against which, before the invention of air-conditioners, the most conscientious collectors were defenceless. All paintings that have spent any considerable period of time in Guangdong bear the same stigma: spots of mould and worm holes. Some of these paintings, scarcely a century old, have been reduced by insects to indecipherable lace.

(10) See above, Note 1 of the Introduction: according to He Juefu, it is *because Su Renshan was condemned for filial impiety* that Wang Zhaoyong obstinately refused to include him in his repertory of Cantonese painters.

(11) This inscription is on *Bodhidharma*, Cat. 58.

(12) On Jen You-wen's personality (highly colourful and in many ways remarkable) and manifold activities, see H. L. Borman *Biographical Dictionary of Republican China* vol. 1, New-York 1967.



(13) Pointed out by Huang Banruo.

(14) This exhibition was followed by the publication of a collection of reproductions, 中國近百年繪畫展覽選集, Peking 1959, including two Su Renshans (八仙 and 簪花仕女).

(15) See 廣東名畫家選集, Canton 1961, Plates 66 to 70 (八仙, 蘇武牧羊, 簪花仕女, 着色山水, 五羊仙).

(16) 廣東博物館藏繪畫, Peking 1965 (葛稚川象).

(17) See 廣東名家書畫選集, Hong Kong 1959 (Plates 41-42: 山水, 五羊仙).

(18) Of five paintings reproduced in the volume mentioned in Note 16, one was not exhibited (蘇武牧羊); two other paintings were included but were not reproduced in the volume. 三十六洞真君圖 and 三十六湖真人圖).

(19) From time to time, visitors passing through Hong Kong claim to have 'discovered' the unknown work of Su Renshan. Let the few local collectors who have intelligently and fervently collected Su Renshan's work over the years—and at whose homes, the visitors in question made their 'discoveries'—not feel too offended. After all, it was only after Christopher Columbus landed in America, that the Redskins knew that was where they lived. J. Watt 屈志仁 raises this point with astute pertinence in his Chinese introduction to Lee Kwok-wing's monograph. It is only surprising that he did not see fit to include it in the English translation of this introduction.

(20) The ignorance which still continues to surround Su Renshan's work, is sometimes staggering. Only a few weeks ago, I met a dealer in paintings, an old fox, who had been in the business for forty years and was vastly learned in the history of Chinese painting, who thought Su Liupeng and Su Renshan were the same man (mistaking Renshan for a courtesy name of Liupeng). It is worth mentioning that the dealer in question came from Peking; as a Northerner, he had never thought it worth his while to pay attention to obscure, Cantonese doodlers.

(21) On this question of the transcendence of expression over invention, see the excellent article by H. C. Chang: *Inscriptions, stylistic analysis and traditional judgement in Yuan, Ming and Ch'ing Painting in Asia Major*, VII, pp. 207-227. In a matter of a few pages, H. C. Chang outlines in an illuminating manner one of the essential problems in interpreting Chinese painting. He opens up a critical perspective which seems to have largely escaped the specialists, writing up their voluminous tomes.

(22) Sacrilege is not too strong a word. What impinges on the virtues of the brush is not the concern of aestheticism alone. The brush was also and above all the symbol of the privilege of a social class, which from the mere fact that its members were educated, had the highest social prestige and a monopoly of political power. Scholars, for example, who paid homage to their worn out brushes by laying them in a cemetery—adorned with headstones and epitaphs—no doubt, thought they were merely giving way to an eccentricity. However, in this type of behaviour we can see—perhaps this is an extreme case but it is no less significant—an expression of the system of values of the ruling class to which they belonged.

Thus, Su Renshan, by reducing the role of the brush to the vulgar role of an artisan's burin, not only ran counter to certain artistic conventions but offended a set of unconscious social values.

(23) Suma's Qi Baishi 齊白石 (more than a hundred paintings) are of the highest quality. Suma discovered Qi Baishi's work in an exhibition in Peking in 1927. He got to know the artist personally and remained one of his most faithful clients throughout the next ten years (Suma left China in 1937). This collection is particularly remarkable for its landscapes, landscapes being a less well-known but by no means less interesting aspect of Qi Baishi's work. A selection of these paintings was exhibited about ten years ago, first in Tokyo and then in New York. As for the Spanish stuff, this was collected when Suma was posted to Madrid and here, his choice was not so happy.

(24) To learn more about this subject, of forgeries proliferating until the features of the original disappear, it is a joy to peruse W. Hochstadter's little study *The real Shen Chou* in *Journal of Oriental Studies*, vol. V, 1-2, Hong Kong 1959-1960. It is difficult to agree with the author in some of his conclusions, which seem grossly exaggerated (according to him, there are only *two* authentic Shen Zhous now in existence anywhere) but on the whole, this article should be useful, stimulating ideas and bringing to mind a few healthy facts, too often forgotten.

## APPENDIX:

### Sources

- BAER LAOREN 八二老人: [蘇長春被老豆監佢戴綠帽], article from the daily news-sheet 晶報, Hong Kong 13/6/1941. This article appeared in a scurrilous, little newspaper (the title itself gives us an idea of its nature: "How Su Renshan was cuckolded by his old man"). It is written in Cantonese, in a colourful style and is full of factual errors—it is a source that should be treated with great caution. However, we are not entitled to ignore it completely because it does to some extent reflect the oral rumours which were still circulating in the region.
- CHEN TIEER 陳鐵兒. Journalist, native of Shunde, he managed to collect a number of oral traditions concerning Su Renshan, from local inhabitants. The information he assembled is related in a private letter addressed to Jen You-wen.
- GUANGDONG MINGHUAJIA XUANJI 廣東名畫家選集, Canton 1961. This glossy volume of an anthology of some of the masterpieces of Cantonese painting, edited by the provincial branch (Guangdong) of the Chinese Association of Artists, contains five reproductions of paintings by Su Renshan (see supra Cat. 353–357). The technical quality of the reproductions is very high.
- GUANGDONG MINGJIA SHU HUA XUANJI 廣東名家書畫選集, Hong Kong 1959, Illustrated catalogue of an exhibition devoted to Cantonese painters and calligraphers. Contains two reproductions of paintings by Su Renshan. One (*The Immortals*, Cat. 357), was also reproduced in the preceding volume. The quality of the reproductions is very bad.
- GUANGDONG WENWU 廣東文物, Hong Kong 1941, 3 vols. A work made in collaboration; a collection of studies on various aspects of the history and culture of Guangdong. The first volume has a selection of reproductions of items from the exhibition of Cantonese culture (Hong Kong, February 1940) including a few paintings by Su Renshan (from the Jen You-wen collection). The reproductions are bad. In the text, there are several interesting studies on Cantonese painting, in particular some critical judgements on the work of Su Renshan.
- HE JUEFU 何覺夫 (alias He Jue 何覺; courtesy name, Mengfu 蒙夫) author of an important article on Su Renshan: 畫人蘇仁山, in 大風半月刊, no. 75 (Hong Kong, 20/9/1940). This same article was published a second time under the same title, in the 1948 June number of 越華報, Canton. He Juefu had made enquiries in the region of Su Renshan's birthplace and collected oral information about him, in particular from an old man, Lü Fangzhi 呂方直, who was more than ninety years old and whose uncle had known Su Renshan personally. He Juefu also questioned Yan Yannan 嚴炎南 (native of Daliang, the main centre of Shunde prefecture), who was compiling documents to make a local

chronicle on Shunde. It was Yan who, among others, supplied details on the conditions of Su Renshan's death—he settled himself down beside a well, inside the precincts of the yamen of Shunde. He Juefu is now in Hong Kong, teaching in a middle school.

HUANG BANRUO 黃般若 (1901–1968). Cantonese painter and connoisseur. (After his death, the City Hall Museum of Hong Kong organised a retrospective exhibition of his work and published a small, illustrated monograph about him). He published a critical study of Su Renshan's art, under his own name: [蘇仁山的畫] in 越華報, Canton, 4 June 1948. He later published a second article about Su Renshan, [蘇長春其人其藝] under the pseudonym Ruopo 若波, in the artistic supplement 藝林 of the Hong Kong daily paper 大公報. This article, which reproduces one version of Su Renshan's 'autobiography', was later reprinted in the collected edition of this artistic supplement 藝林叢錄, Hong Kong 1962, vol. 3, p. 75.

HUANG MIAOZI 黃苗子. Cantonese cartoonist. Published some critical reflections on the art of Su Renshan in the cultural supplement 文化界 of 國民日報 (28 April 1941)—reprinted in 廣東文物 vol. I, pp. 295–296. Later, Huang himself built up a collection of Su Renshan's paintings. He intended to publish a book about them in Shanghai in 1948, just at the time of the Liberation. Since then, Huang has revealed himself through several erudite works (editions of classical texts on pictorial theory, published by 上海人民美術出版社). We do not know what has become of his collection or of his old idea of a publication on Su Renshan.

JEN YOU-WEN (Jian Youwen 簡又文), political and cultural figure (see the biographical note in H. L. Borman: *Biographical Dictionary of Republican China*, vol. I, New York, 1967). Famous for his historical studies on the Taiping movement and also for his untiring services in the cause of Cantonese culture. Jen has brought together a vast documentary collection on Cantonese painting and possesses the largest collection of Su Renshan's paintings. He has collected a certain number of historical documents about the artist and has written an essay, the manuscript of which formed the starting point of my present study. As I mentioned in my foreword, it is to him I owe an essential part of my information. Jen's work about Su Renshan [畫壇怪傑蘇仁山] is in press at the moment and will come out in Hong Kong sometime during 1970.

LI FANFU 李凡夫. Cantonese cartoonist. Died in Hong Kong in 1968. Had a large collection of Su Renshan, a good part of which he donated to the Museum of Canton. Author of a biographical (he received his information from Liu Tao) and critical article about Su Renshan: [蘇仁山, 一個倔強的畫家] in the cultural supplement 文化界, no. 50 of 國民日報 Hong Kong, 1941 (?).

LEE KWOK-WING (Li Guorong 李國榮). Amateur of art, collector, calligrapher, teaches in a teacher's training College, Hong Kong. Has a large collection of paintings and is particularly interested in Cantonese painting, of which he has collected a rich sampling. He took special pains to assemble a large collection

of Su Renshan's work (this is now partly dispersed) and it was exhibited in the City Hall Museum of Hong Kong in 1966. He is the author of a bilingual monograph [蘇仁山]—*Su Jen-shan*, 18 Plates, Hong Kong 1966, which was the first serious attempt to make a biographical and critical synthesis on Su Renshan.

LI TIANMA 李天馬 author of a short biographical article on Su Renshan: [廣東名畫家蘇仁山], which appeared in a daily paper in China after the Liberation (a cutting was preserved by Jen You-wen but with no mention of the title or the date of publication).

LIU TAO 劉濤 (courtesy name Yian 一庵). Born in 1892, the exact date of his death is unknown. His home town was Fengjian 逢簡 in Shunde prefecture. A painter and calligrapher of some renown, he came to Hong Kong as a refugee during the war and lived there as a dealer of paintings. He is mentioned by Li Jianer 李健兒 in [廣東現代畫人傳] but Liu never himself wrote anything about Su Renshan, except an inscription on a forged painting by him, one of the notorious series (Cat. 228). As Liu Tao was a painter and a dealer, isn't it possible that he lent his hand to fabricating these forgeries? In any case, he collected numerous items of information about Su Renshan in Shunde, facts which he later communicated orally to Li Fanfu and to Jen You-wen.

MA GUOQUAN 馬國權 author of a small article [蘇仁山] in the series 廣東印人傳 published in the Hong Kong daily paper 大公報 (cutting preserved by Jen You-wen, but no date).

REN ZHENHAN 任真漢 Cantonese painter, settled in Hong Kong. Author of two critical studies on Su Renshan, both under the same title [蘇仁山的藝術]. One appeared in the cultural supplement 文化界 no. 50 of 國民日報, Hong Kong 1941 and the other in 越華報, Canton, 4 June 1948.

RUOPO 若波 see Huang Banruo.

SHANG CHENGZUO 商承祚, philologist, archaeologist and historian of Cantonese art. Author of a monumental index 中國歷代書畫篆刻家字號索引, Peking, 1960, one of the only general works on Chinese art in which Su Renshan is mentioned. (For the chronology of Su, Shang Chengzuo has unfortunately been induced into an error propagated by Xian Baogan, and places his activity under the reigns Daoguang and Xianfeng.)

SU RUOHU 蘇若瑚 (1856–1917). Courtesy name 器甫, literary name 簡園. His home-town was Wuzhou 烏洲 in Shunde prefecture. For a time he was a tutor of the children of the Imperial family in Peking. Later, he resigned from this post and returned to Guangdong to continue his own studies on the geography and history of the frontier provinces of China (he himself was a disciple of Li Wentian 李文田, a specialist of Mongolian studies). He became interested in Su Renshan on whom, living as he was in Shunde in the 19th Century, he was able to collect first hand information. Some of this has been retained in an inscription he wrote on one of Su Renshan's paintings (Cat. 58).

WANG YILUN 王益倫 art critic in Canton. Author of a critical study on Su Renshan's art [關於蘇仁山的畫] in the 大光報, Canton 28/5/1948 and of a comparative study of Su Renshan and Su Liupeng [兩蘇的人物畫] in the 越華報 Canton, October 1948.

WANG ZHAOYONG 汪兆鏞 author of [嶺南畫徵略], collection of biographical notes on more than 400 Cantonese painters from the Tang period to the end of the Qing. We mentioned above how Wang refused to enter a note on Su Renshan in the original edition of his work (1930). A note was finally added in a supplement to the posthumous reedition of the book, published in Hong Kong in 1961 by Wang's son.

XIAN BAOGAN 冼寶幹 author of [佛山忠義鄉志] in which (section 流寓, Chap. 14, p. 8) there is a page devoted to Su Renshan, describing his stay in Foshan with Liang Jiutu.

*Zhongguo Jin Bai Nian Huihua Zhanlan Xuanji* 中國近百年繪畫展覽選集 Peking 1959. Has two reproductions of paintings by Su Renshan (later reprinted in *Guangdong Minghuajia Xuanji*.)

I would also like to mention the book by Li Qilong 李啟隆: [留庵隨筆] which must contain a passage about Su Renshan (it is quoted among others by Lee Kwok-wing). Unfortunately, I was unable to consult this work, which it is now impossible to find.

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